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Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

LETTER from the EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It was back in August of last year that my wife and I walked our oldest son Hank the half-mile down the street to the neighborhood elementary school. It was his first day of kindergarten, and though he'd been in preschool, this felt different — a level-up into a real live big-boy school. He'd spent the past few weeks asking his mom — a longtime public elementary classroom teacher — every question he could conceive.

Who will be in my class? Where do I sit? Is my teacher nice? Who is the principal? When do we eat lunch? What do I do if I need to use the bathroom?

That half-mile walk ran the gamut of emotions — excitement, nervousness, joy, unease. A 12-minute journey that might as well have been twelve hours. But when we arrived at Ms. Thompson's door, Hank skipped into the room gleefully and found his desk.

It was a big change, sure, but Hank was ready for it.

His dad, on the other hand...not so much. That half-mile walk back home felt even longer than the way there, especially through tear-blurred eyes.

While my six-year-old may have been able to process change, somehow it becomes harder as we get older. Maybe more time gives you more time to get used to the status quo, making the departure all the more difficult to accept.

And somehow, that goes double for football fans. It's probably because football — and sports in general — is our hobby, our escape from the crushing weight of the real world that changes echo so loudly. Why would you mess



GREG TEPPER

feels more unstable than ever — and that's saying something. Player empowerment and compensation in college football was long, long overdue. But four years after NCAA v. Alston brought us NIL; three years after the hyper-acceleration of the transfer portal; and a year after the latest round of major conference realignment, it's hard to argue the sport is holistically in a healthier place.

The gap between the haves and the have-nots in college football feels wider and wider. Throw in the good-in-theory, debatable-in-practice College Football Playoff — whose committee should be viewed as a television organization making television decisions, and nothing more — and it's easy to feel cynical about the sport, and long for the simpler days.

See what I mean about resisting change?

Our cover subject is, in many ways, a product of embracing change — Texas coach Steve Sarkisian's rise from relative outcast to the man at the center of the Longhorns' return to prominence. Mike Craven's terrific main feature is well worth your time.

There's change abounding in the high school football ranks as well, though it may be more subtle than the relative clanging cowbell of the

college game. Take, for instance, the Celina Bobcats, our gatefold coverboys. Fresh off their ninth state championship, coach Bill Elliott, superstar quarterback Bowe Bentley, and bruising linebacker Luke Biagini look poised for a return to their dynastic roots. But dig a little deeper — as our Carter Yates did in his remarkable feature inside these pages — and you'll see a community that's exploding with growth that could alter the future complexion of both the football program and the town itself.

College football

And perhaps you've already noticed that we've made some changes around here, too. We've got a new masthead, for one. We've got a new look. And, yes, we've got a new leadership structure — our late legendary founder Dave Campbell is now and forever our Editor Emeritus, and it's my honor, and no small challenge, to follow in his footsteps as this publication's second editor-in-chief.

But through all of those changes — on the gridiron and within these pages — I've found it important to stay as true to our roots as possible. College football looks and feels different, but it's still the sport we fell in love with. High school football may change, yet it's still that same cultural bond that ties Texans together for generations. And yes, things may look a little different around Dave Campbell's Texas Football, but we'll forever be committed to covering football in Texas like nobody else, all while upholding the principles Dave laid out for us on his kitchen table some 65 years ago.

Change is a part of life — even if I'm still catching up to our six-year-old. Maybe Hank can keep leading the way.



Photo Credit: JD Bryant

Where Legends Begin

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Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

LETTER FROM
THE EDITOR

TARLETON STATE FOOTBALL

WINNING
CULTURE
ON & OFF
THE FIELD



RECRUITING
CENTRAL



2025
FOOTBALL
SCHEDULE



BRICK
BY
BRICK

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On ye Tarleton, on ye Tarleton, Break right through that line! Ever forward, ever onward, We'll get there or die! On ye Tarleton, on ye Tarleton, Fight for victory! Fight, Texans, fight, fight, fight, And win this game! On ye Tarleton, on ye Tarleton, Strive for ideals high! Guard your standards, your traditions, Raise them to the sky! On ye Tarleton, on ye Tarleton, Biggest and the best! Oh Tarleton, how I love you, None have guessed!

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Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

DOUBLE
COVERAGE

NEXT IN LINE

From the end zone of iconic House Park, with the skyline of downtown Austin flickering beyond the scoreboard, three young fans take in the season opener — the 23rd Taco Shack Bowl, where Anderson faces rival McCallum for north Austin bragging rights. Judging by their attire, these are future Anderson Trojans, and on this night they saw their team win, 57-40. It's a reminder that football in this state is not just about who's playing right now, but those who are observing, learning, waiting their turn — a constantly refreshing legacy that serves as a cultural touchstone in communities all across Texas.

Photo by Chris Schmidt

DOUBLE COVERAGE



DOUBLE COVERAGE



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DOUBLE
COVERAGE

FRAME PERFECT

When Texas offensive lineman Jake Majors hoisted quarterback Arch Manning after the signal-caller's dazzling 67-yard touchdown run against UTSA, the burnt orange pair weren't the only winners in the building. So, too, was Dave Campbell's Texas Football contributing photographer Kassy Lara, who nabbed the moment on film and, months later, nabbed the title of 2024 DCTF Photo of the Year thanks to fan voting. More than 23,000 votes were cast on TexasFootball.com to crown Kassy, but there were dozens of other terrific entries. That includes second-place finisher Michael Hall — who captured the emotion of Paradise defensive end Blake Read moments after the Panthers fell to Malakoff in the 3A Division I state semifinal — and third-place finisher Darrell Gest — who didn't miss Edcouch-Elsa coach Victor Cardenas' victory path after the Yellow Jackets captured the District 16-5A DII title.

Photos by Kassy Lara, Michael Hall and Darrell Gest



DCTF

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DOUBLE
COVERAGE

DOUBLE COVERAGE

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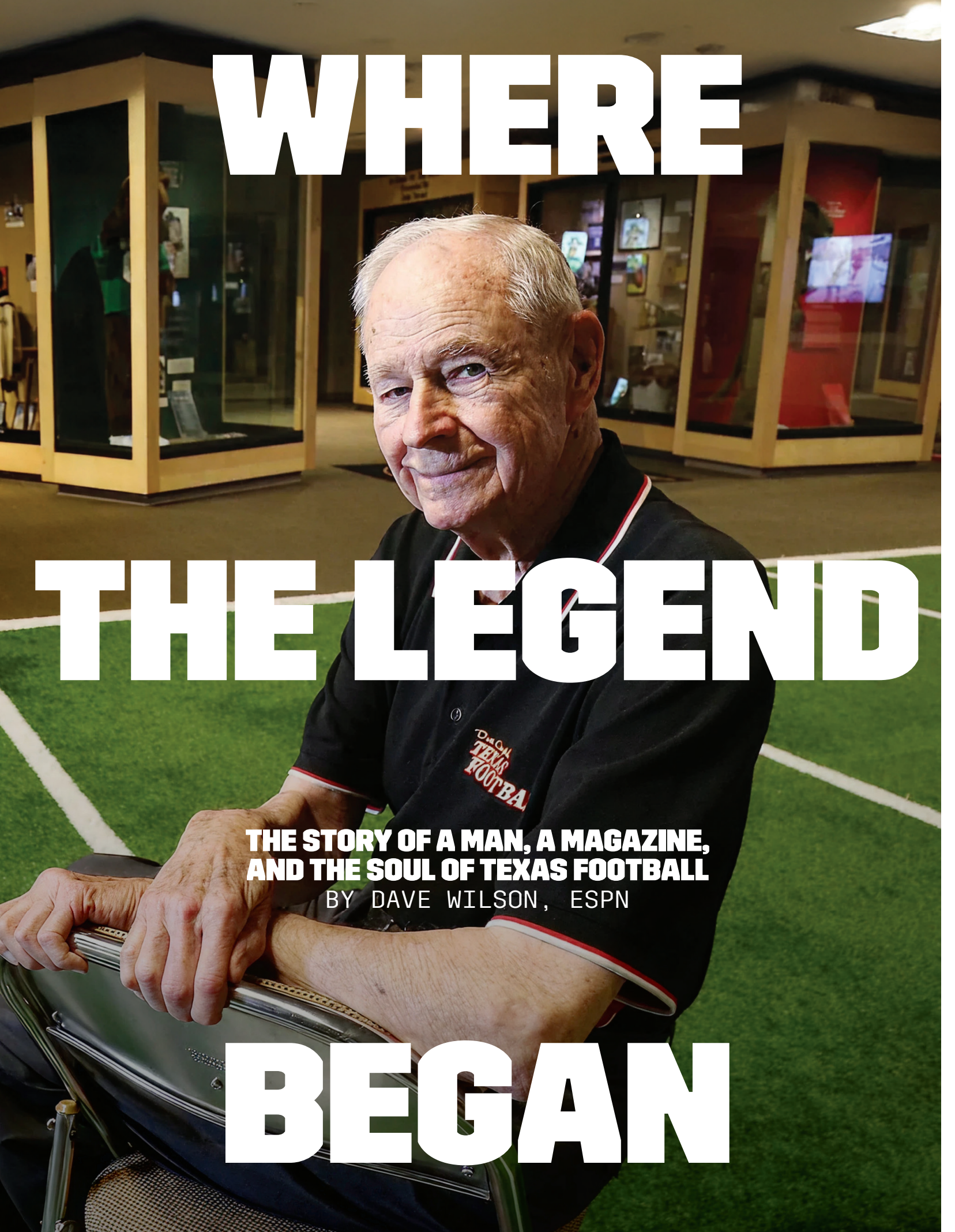
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WHERE

THE LEGEND

**THE STORY OF A MAN, A MAGAZINE,
AND THE SOUL OF TEXAS FOOTBALL**

BY DAVE WILSON, ESPN

BEGAN

Late in the Texas summer, like a cold front that comes to relieve the oppressive heat, hope arrives for weary Texans when Dave Campbell's Texas Football arrives in stores and mailboxes from Beaumont to El Paso.

The magazine, published since 1960, inspires such devotion that diehards go from store to store to find their copy. They give them as gifts, mail them to Texas expats, or just take it with them to devour every word covering more than 1,500 high schools and 47 colleges, along with recruiting and pro football.

Over those past 65 years, Campbell became Texas' version of John Madden, now known more for video games than his hall of fame NFL coaching career, or Michael Jordan, whose shoes will carry his name further than his legendary NBA career did. People buy Madden. They buy Jordans. They grab a Dave Campbell's.

Campbell, who was born in 1925 outside Waco, died in December 2021 -- on a Friday night, naturally -- at 96. But in 2025, when he would've turned 100, his name resonates as loudly as ever.

"I think of him as the George Washington of Texas sportswriters," said Kevin Sherrington, who's spent four decades at The Dallas Morning News. "He set a standard and everyone respected it. For it to transcend generations really means something. Blackie [Sherrod] is the king of Texas sports writers and always will be from people who understand the business. But from a standpoint of influencing sports in Texas, Dave had a far greater and longer reach than Blackie did."

From his home base of Waco, Campbell did it all without compromise. He loved his hometown, loved his Baylor Bears and began his journalism career as a copy boy at the Waco Tribune-Herald two days after his high school graduation before he began attending Baylor.

He dreamt of being a chemist, but focus was a problem. In a lab, he couldn't take his eyes off the tennis courts outside. He decided maybe he'd just write about sports instead.

"And thank heavens for that because he would've been a horrible chemist," joked his daughter, Julie Carlson. "Tennis was his first love by far."

In 1943, Campbell was drafted and dispatched to World War II, where he earned a Bronze Star for combat duty in France and Germany in the 14th Armored Division of the 7th Army. He returned to Waco, Baylor and the Tribune-Herald in 1946, and never left.

It was there he met Reba Lou Weaver, a young reporter who had just returned from the scene of a horrific fatal car collision, badly shaken, when Campbell noticed she was trembling and having trouble typing. "Just tell me what happened, and

I'll try to help you," he told her. Together, they got through the story. Then they got married a year later. Their partnership, which gave them two daughters, Becky and Julie, lasted more than 70 years, until her death in 2020 at 95.

"He had that humanity for a coworker at a time when there were relatively few women working in newspapers," said David Barron, who retired from the Houston Chronicle in 2021 after spending nearly 50 years in Texas journalism. "I just think that that indicates his kindness. He was not just the typical scores and stats sports guy."

Campbell graduated from Baylor in 1950 and became the sports editor of the Waco newspaper three years later. From his vantage point, he felt like national publications were sloppy covering his beloved Southwest Conference, an afterthought to the New York magazines. There were typos, factual errors, and even worse, one didn't even include Baylor in its conference preview.

In 1959, when visiting the in-laws in Navasota, Reba became frustrated when Dave spent hours every day in a hammock in the front yard, but didn't say anything. On the drive back to Waco, Dave told her he had an epiphany.

"I figured this all out. I'm going to start this

magazine," he told Reba on the way back to Waco, their daughter, Becky Roche said. "It's going to be called Texas Football."

A week in a Navasota hammock changed sports journalism.

Campbell's creation somehow made Texas' fascination with football grow, all while shrinking the vastness of the state in the pre-internet days where tales of Panhandle legends were mysteries to East Texans.

"The magazine first came out when I was in high school, and a kid from Orange could read about the Ding Dong Daddies from Dumas," said legendary Texas A&M coach R.C. Slocum, who recently officially retired after 53 years in maroon. "You'd hear about Borger who was really good back then, you'd read about Wichita Falls and some of those places you really didn't know. You knew it was somewhere out that way. But all of a sudden Dave Campbell's magazine brought all of that into reality."

Reba's kitchen table became the publishing office. Campbell and his Tribune-Herald sports staff of Hollis Biddle, Al Ward and Jim Montgomery, wrote, edited and designed the entire first edition in 1960, featuring Texas' Jack Col-

Courtesy of the Campbell family



"I figured this all out. I'm going to start a magazine. It's going to be called Texas Football."

Feature **WHERE THE LEGEND BEGAN**

lins on the cover. It was an instant hit, selling out across the state, but Campbell decided to print another run, and wholesalers opted against restocking. He lost \$5,000 -- the equivalent of about \$55,000 today.

"He ended up dumping a lot of magazines in the Waco city dump, which is why the ones that survived are worth so much money," said Barron, who later became the magazine's managing editor from 1990 to 2004.

But Campbell's spirit and his connections kept the dream afloat. Within a few years, the magazine became profitable and began to grow. So, too, did Campbell's influence and his network.

Sherrington said there was a changing of the guard in sports journalism in that era. Fort Worth's Dan Jenkins had been scooped up by Sports Illustrated to help cover the same things Campbell had prioritized. The old guard wasn't much interested in the new generation of sportswriters. Campbell, Sherrington said, was always on the lookout for new talent, and was uniquely encouraging. Sherrington recalled a moment in the early 1980s in the Baylor press box where Campbell, who he admired but had never met, came to tell him how much he loved his work and that he'd nominated him for Texas Sports-writer of the Year.

"You could have knocked me over with a feather," Sherrington said. "I just was so blown away that anybody would think of nominating me for that, much less Dave Campbell. Throughout my

career, Dave always would call to tell me how much he enjoyed something I had written and it meant the world to me that he would do that."

His reputation paid dividends when it came time to produce a magazine that required a lot of work for not a little money.

"The reason we did it was because it was Texas football, the Bible of Texas football, and because it was by Dave Campbell," Sherrington said. "All of us wanted to do whatever we could for Dave because of how much he meant to all of us."

Campbell's profile rose along with the success of the magazine. He was the president of the Football Writers Association of America during college football's 100th anniversary. But he never got too big for Waco or for Baylor. Legendary Bears coach Grant Teaff, now 91, arrived in Waco at just 39 in 1972, making a big leap from Angelo State to one of the toughest jobs in football. His predecessor, Bill Beall, had gone 3-28 in three seasons.

"I was young and didn't know boo from Sic 'Em, so he kind of led me along the way," Teaff said. "He was one of the top sportswriters in the United States of America, looked at far and wide. It was so great to have somebody with his knowledge and expertise that was a true friend. I've been around the block a time or two. I've been to New York City, I've been to Paris, I've been around the world, and I have never met a finer writer nor a finer man than Dave Campbell. I loved him."

Campbell's daughters said their lives -- and

their house -- were filled with a quest for knowledge, for vacations, for reading books. Dave loved thrillers, mysteries, and World War II history, "probably to make sense of his time in the war," said his daughter, Julie Carlson. He loved commiserating with authors, including once taking John Grisham to a Baylor baseball practice.

When James Michener wrote "Texas," his 1,000-page novel that berthed the largest initial print run in Random House's history, he came to Campbell for counsel on understanding the culture of the state.

"My special debt is to Dave Campbell of Waco, publisher of a spectacularly successful magazine about Texas football," Michener wrote in the book's acknowledgements. Campbell became friends with Willie Nelson, often being in his orbit around Darrell Royal and Frank Broyles.

"I was at a UT football game about two or three years ago and they're playing this clip of a young Willie Nelson, and I'm like, oh my gosh, that's my mom and dad in the background," Roche said.

But as Campbell's profile rose, he stayed the same.

"He was a real gentleman," Slocum said. "When I was coaching, he would come down to visit every year before he'd do his magazine. He was a prince of a guy, loved football and he knew his stuff, but he put in the work to do it."

Campbell continued serving as the Tribune-Herald's sports editor for 40 years, until retiring in 1993. He sold the magazine to Host

Courtesy of the Campbell family



"I think of him as the George Washington of Texas sportswriters."

— Kevin Sherrington, The Dallas Morning News



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“He was one of the top sportswriters in the United States of America, looked at far and wide. It was so great to have somebody with his knowledge and expertise that was a true friend.”

— Grant Teaff, former Baylor head coach

Communications in 1985, but remained as editor until 2021. There have been two more ownership changes, but no one will ever dare remove Campbell's name from the title. Slocum said Campbell was a celebrity to coaches around the country who would look for any info to mine the state for talent before the advent of recruiting services.

“He is still a legend in sports, because other schools out of state would get those magazines,” Slocum said. “It was a great recruiting tool to see who the top players were in Texas.”

And he never stopped working, either, and Reba was always there.

“She should have been the MVP because she would go with them to all these sporting events and she was the one in the stands,” Roche said.

It wasn't easy, because Campbell's pregame and postgame work made for long days. Roche said her fondest sports memory was in her father's later years, when Texas beat USC in the Rose Bowl to win the national championship after the 2005 season when her son Campbell was a sophomore at Texas.

“As we always did, we got to the stadium really, really early,” Roche said. “Five to six hours early, maybe more than that.”

They rode a shuttle from the hotel to the stadium, walked Dave to the media entrance, then went and tailgated. They watched one of the greatest games in college football history -- Dave said it was one of the two greatest games he'd ever seen along with the 1969 Texas-Arkansas game -- and then waited. And waited. And waited.

“We go back to the media entrance to wait for my dad to come out. We see Reggie Bush and Matt Leinart come out. This went on for hours. Finally my dad comes out and it's late, the stands are deserted, the parking lots are deserted, but he's just had the best time. The shuttles quit running. We don't have a ride, and it's before Uber. We're just walking along this thoroughfare and we're all just so excited, we don't even care.”

Finally, some Texas fans drive by and spot the contingent walking and ask them where they're

headed, before realizing the hotel is on their way. Everyone piles in, starts making small talk and introducing themselves.

“I'm Dave Campbell from Waco,” he says.

The driver continues down the road in silence. A few minutes later, he quietly said, “I can't believe we just picked up Dave Campbell.”

His people were everywhere. Even in prison. His family marveled upon discovering a cache of letters from Leon, an inmate in Huntsville, who was broken-hearted that someone in the joint had stolen his copy of Texas Football, saying you just couldn't trust anybody anymore.

“Daddy sent him another copy and they struck up a correspondence for a while there,” Roche said. “He treated everyone with respect and kindness.”

Campbell loved carrying around a silver Sharpie and signing copies of the magazine for fans. Still, the family says they never quite understood how much he meant to Texans. It was fitting, they said, that a man who had lived and breathed Baylor sports and had been through so many lean years with the Bears, died when he did.

“He watched Baylor win the Big 12 championship and then after that he went into a very sharp decline and died a week later,” Carlson said. Still, she and her sister said they weren't prepared for the outpouring of love following his death.

“He died about 7 o'clock on the Friday night on December 10th, and I called all my family to tell them,” Roche said. “Before I could barely get the last call off, someone said, ‘Oh, they just announced it at the [Austin] Westlake High School game, or they just announced it at this game.’ We just were so overwhelmed.”

Carlson said shortly after, she got a call from an unlisted number. Texas governor Greg Abbott was on the other end, asking the family to please consider a burial spot in the Texas State Cemetery, about a mile from the state capitol, reserved for “Texans who have made significant contributions to Texas history and culture in any number

of fields, from artists and athletes to scientists and scholars.”

Carlson and Roche struggled with the decision. Here was someone whose life revolved around Waco, who never left. The man who helped get the Texas Sports Hall of Fame moved to Waco, which features a full-size replica of Campbell's office, despite his modest objections.

Now, they would bury him in Austin? They had to make a quick decision, and it was agonizing.

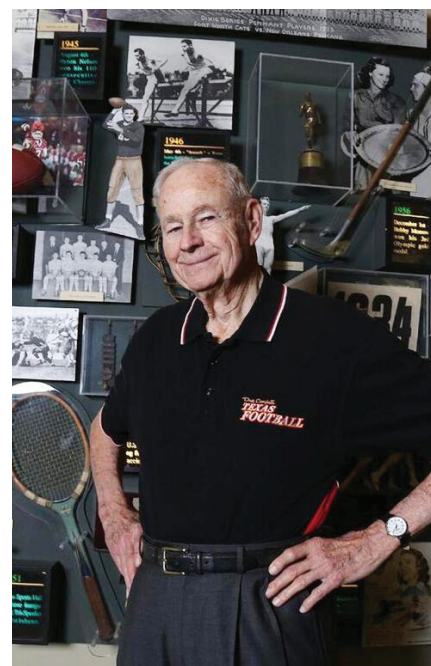
They took a trip to see the cemetery, and were taken to the section where they could pick out a plot. And they looked around and realized how right it was.

“There was Coach Royal, cover of Texas Football,” Carlson said, before noticing the headstone of two other Longhorns legends. “There's Cedric Benson, cover of Texas Football. There's James Street, cover of Texas Football.”

It was a fitting resting place for a man who took the hard road to get there. His father died on Christmas when he was 7. He grew up with a single mother during the Great Depression, then suffered through the horrors of World War II. He came home and became a model husband, father and grandfather, all legacies he cherished more than having his name on a glossy cover.

“Here's this person who really had a very hard first 22 years of his life and could have easily been bitter or defeated, but instead it motivated him,” Carlson said. “I think he was just always so thankful and grateful for everything he had in every opportunity that it made him stronger. I think that's pretty remarkable.”

Courtesy of the Campbell family





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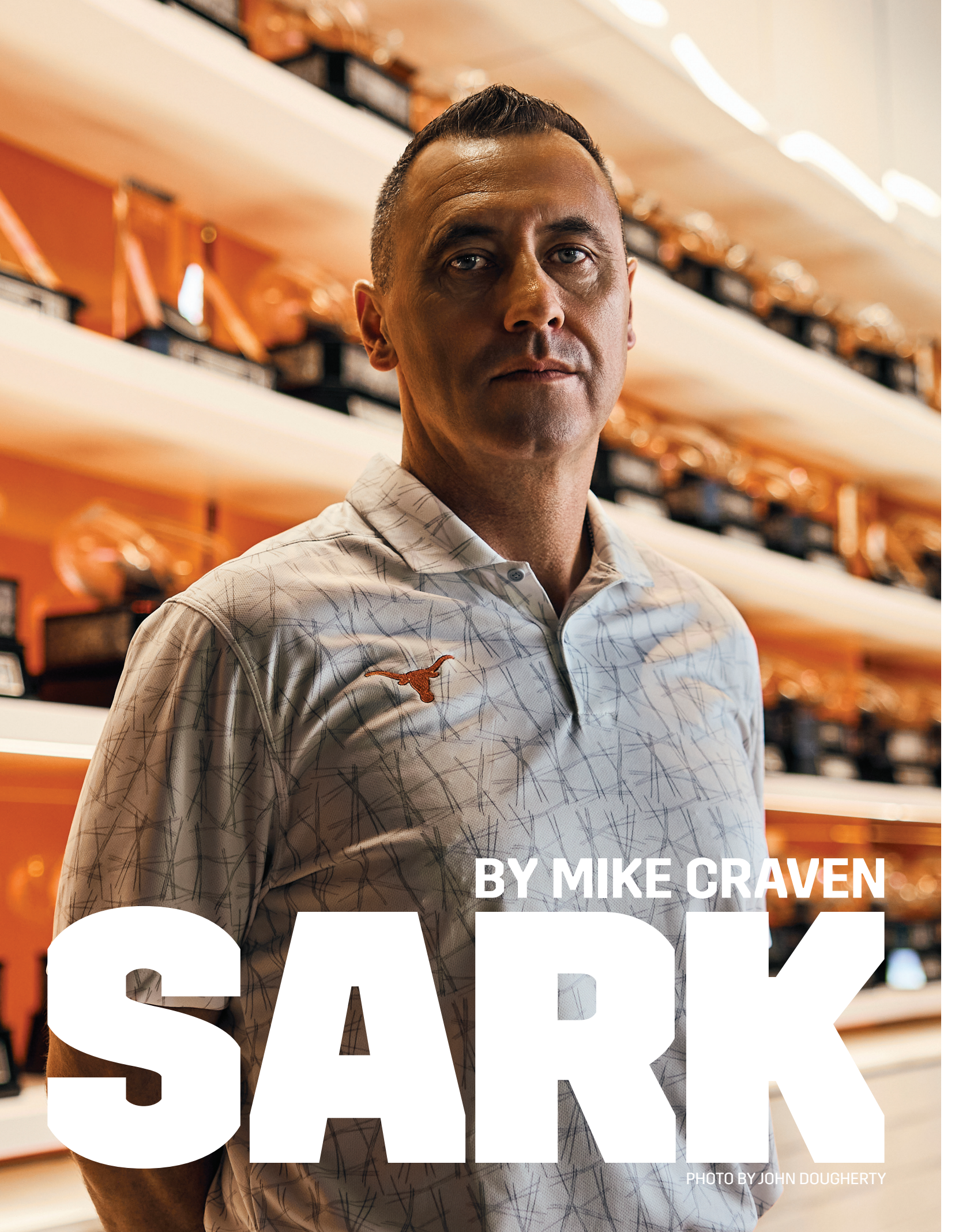
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BY MIKE CRAVEN

SARK

PHOTO BY JOHN DOUGHERTY

Steve Sarkisian couldn't score an interview, much less a job in coaching the offseason after USC fired him in October of the 2015 season. As it became clear that Sarkisian wouldn't be on a team's staff for the 2016 season, he reached out to contacts at FOX to become a color commentator that season.

He was hired in June and his first scheduled game was a Week 1 matchup between Oklahoma State and Central Michigan, which ended up an instant classic and a major upset.

But Sarkisian would never call that game. Or any other game. The months of July and August are hard on college football junkies. Sarkisian never experienced that drought because he was always on a team, as a quarterback at El Camino Junior College or BYU or with the Saskatchewan Roughriders and as a coach at stops such as USC and Washington. This was his first true offseason. He didn't like it.

Sarkisian told his wife that he couldn't handle going July and August without being around football. He decided to take a tour and stop at a handful of college and pro training camps to cure his itch and keep his name and face out there for future employment opportunities after a year in the television booth.

He went to the Atlanta Falcons to see Dan Quinn and to the University of Florida to visit Jim McElwain. The next stops were to see Gus Bradley with the Jacksonville Jaguars and Dirk Koetter with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. His football-centric summer tour was to end at Alabama with Nick Saban two weeks before the start of the college football season. He found himself in Saban's office two or three times a day during his stop, analyzing Jalen Hurts and different defensive schemes that the Crimson Tide would face that season.

Sarkisian and then-Alabama offensive coordinator Lane Kiffin both joined Pete Carroll's staff at USC heading into the 2001 season. Kiffin oversaw the tight ends while Sarkisian led the quarterbacks. They both eventually became head coach of the Trojans and both were run out of town. Kiffin was the offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach at Alabama when Sarkisian made his stop. The current Ole Miss coach suggested that his old pal stay in Tuscaloosa as an analyst. Coach Saban agreed and offered Sarkisian a job.

But Sarkisian already had one. He was set to call his first game in two weeks. Sarkisian re-

turned home and Saban, the best recruiter in football, called and gave a final pitch. Unsurprisingly, Saban landed Sarkisian's commitment. He was a football coach, after all. That whirlwind tour only served as a reminder of what Sarkisian had lost, and what he'd love to regain.

"What hit was being around guys I respected at all these different places and I lit up. I lit back up," Sarkisian said. "I was infused with energy again. Of like, this is what I want to do. There may come a time I want to sit behind the camera, I don't know, but I do know what I love to do right now."

Sarkisian called FOX and told them he was moving to Alabama to become an offensive analyst for the Crimson Tide. Their first game was against USC. Sarkisian didn't want it to look like Saban hired him or that he took the job to get over on the Trojans, so he stayed home that week and watched football all day. Including that upset win for Central Michigan over Oklahoma State. The next day, he was in Tuscaloosa for good and ready to start chasing a dream he thought was on an indefinite pause.

Sarkisian's base salary as head coach at USC in 2015 was \$2.99 million. He worked at Alabama in 2016 for roughly \$28,000 dollars, the minimum required in the state of Alabama for an employee to earn benefits for their family. His office was an old, deserted team room with a partition and a desk in the middle that he shared with Mike Locksley. The two nicknamed their makeshift office the "submarine" and it became the go-to spot in the Alabama facility. Sarkisian didn't have to recruit or go to position meetings. He sat in the submarine and nerded out on football. He game planned. He studied. And mostly, he had a blast.

"It wasn't about the money or the office or the car, none of those things that most people think

are the best part of being a head coach," Sarkisian said about his year as an analyst in the bowels of the Alabama machine. "It was literally for the love of the game and the job and being around the camaraderie that only football buildings provide."

Sarkisian earned his Bachelor's in the Saban school of program building during that first year as an analyst. He returned after a two-year stint in the NFL calling plays for the Atlanta Falcons to earn his Master's. "I feel like I didn't have all the answers when I left after a year," Sarkisian said. "I spent years studying Carroll while I worked for him. I wanted more time with Nick to see that, too."

Sarkisian began to compare and contrast his two most influential coaching mentors – Saban and Carroll. Saban earned his stripes as the defensive coordinator for the Cleveland Browns under head coach Bill Belichick. The Browns were 31-33 over four seasons. He then became the head coach at Michigan State and was 25-22-1 over his first four seasons with the Spartans. He was also 15-17 in two years as the head coach of the Miami Dolphins from 2005-2006.

Saban's first 10-win season as a head coach came at LSU in 2001. It was his eighth season as a head coach and he was 49 years old. Saban won his first national title at 51. Sarkisian noticed a similar trend when looking back at Carroll's climb to college football royalty. Carroll was 33-31 in four seasons as an NFL head coach before landing at USC and finishing his first season with a 6-6 record. His first 10-win season as a head coach in college came in 2002 when Carroll was 51.

"For the first 20 to 25 years of both of their careers, they were still trying to figure it out," Sarkisian concluded. "If Saban retires after the Dolphins stint, no one is writing books about him and calling him the greatest ever, right? Same

“It wasn't about the money or the office or the car... It was literally for the love of the game and the job and being around the camaraderie that only football buildings provide.”

for Pete if he hangs it up at 50.”

Saban and Carroll are opposites in most visible ways. Saban is defined by discipline and structure. Carroll is more fun – more West Coast. He’d bring a basketball hoop to the team room and play the piano. But Sarkisian noticed that what they did share was a sense of self. They knew who they were.

“They didn’t have to act in front of the team,” Sarkisian said. “Teams take the personality of the head coach, and so while I’m in my second stint at USC, my project on the side kind of becomes, okay, who is Steve Sarkisian? Who am I?”

Sarkisian left high school in Torrance, California, without any football offers so he landed at USC as a walk-on middle infielder before transferring home to El Camino Junior College as a shortstop. He revived his football career there in 1993 and landed at BYU and was eventually the WAC Offensive Player of the Year and a second-team All-American as a senior when he led the NCAA in passer rating and led the Cougars to a 13-1 regular season record.

Those numbers didn’t help Sarkisian get drafted into the NFL so he played for three seasons in the Canadian Football League for the Saskatchewan Roughriders. His professional career ended after the 1999 season when he threw for 16 touchdown passes and 21 interceptions for a team that finished 3-15. Sarkisian joined the real world

and began a career in the dot.com space while volunteering as the quarterbacks coach at the junior college he played at almost a decade prior.

Sarkisian eventually landed a graduate assistant job on Pete Carroll’s staff at USC because of his old coach, Norm Chow. That put Sarkisian on the fast track in the coaching world, working his way up the ranks at USC and then the Oakland Raiders before becoming the offensive coordinator for the Trojans by 2007. In 2009, at only 35 years old, Sarkisian was the head coach at Washington. By 40, he was leading the USC Trojans.

And then came the fall. A very public firing that led Sarkisian to take the summer tour that landed him in Saban’s carwash. In the process of asking himself who he was after all that, Sarkisian decided to give himself some grace and recognize a trait that kept him upright. Sure, he was knocked down. But he never stayed down.

“That took a lot of toughness, a lot of resiliency, a lot of grit to do all that, right? To stay in the fight,” Sarkisian said. “I do think toughness is part of my DNA. I decided if I ever got back in this chair, I’m going to make sure we’re a really tough football team. Nobody is going to be tougher than we are. We’re going to have a level of mental and physical toughness about this team and this organization that is going to be unparalleled around the country.”

Toughness wasn’t the first word associated with

Texas football when Steve Sarkisian was hired as the 31st head football coach in program history on January 2, 2021. It wasn’t the third or fourth word, either. The Longhorns were 78-53 and without a conference championship or a berth into the four-team College Football Playoff in the 11 seasons between 2010 and 2020. In the 11 seasons prior to that, the program was 119-24 with a national championship and two Big 12 championships.

Jordan Whittington’s first taste of Sarkisian’s brand of toughness came early in fall camp in 2021 when he missed a block on a bubble screen and was told to stop being soft by the new head coach with some colorful language mixed in. For some players, being cussed out in practice is a negative. For Whittington, it was a sign of a positive future. Of accountability and toughness. Of a new, gritty Longhorn program. A brand of football that Whittington would come to illustrate multiple times in the next couple of years.

“When someone gets on you like that and you have the right mindset, you take it and turn it into something positive,” Whittington said. “I’m glad he didn’t hold back.”

Even Sarkisian’s toughness and resolve was tested in Year 1 as his Longhorns blew multiple second-half leads and finished 5-7 in 2021. Texas and Oklahoma announced future moves to the SEC prior to the season but the team in Austin looked lightyears away from contending in the



“
TOUGHNESS
IS PART OF
MY DNA”

Photo by Jeff Dahlia

“This group wants to be the team that gets over the hump... there’s a mentality that you have to have to get it done and we have that mindset and pride within this locker room.”

best football conference in America. How could a team that lost to Kansas in overtime be ready to play the Alabamas of the world by 2024?

Sarkisian spent the first year as head coach evaluating the program. He reserved judgment when hired and tried to avoid any preconceived notions about what ailed the Texas football program. He gave everyone in the building – players and staff – a clean slate during his first team meeting so that he could develop his own perspective on what needed to change on the Forty Acres. Sarkisian decided the answer was culture. Sure, the roster and the schemes and the development needed tweaking, but the root cause of Texas’ fall from grace was deeper.

“We had players that would pick and choose when they want to do things the right way,” Sarkisian said. “We had players and people in this organization that were entitled because they put the Longhorn logo on every day and think they deserve success. We had people that want to be good but have no idea what it means to be great.”

Texas wouldn’t need to wait until 2024 to test itself against the cream of the SEC because of a scheduled home-and-home against Alabama in 2022 and 2023. This wasn’t the first time Sarkisian faced a former mentor. He beat Carroll back in 2009 while he was the head coach at Washington. His Horns came one point short of knocking off the Crimson Tide at home in 2022, but the close loss provided his team with confidence and motivation for the meeting in 2023.

To be great, however, the Longhorns needed to learn how to finish. How to rise to the challenge. Talent provided them early leads in games. Toughness was required to get over the hump. Sarkisian challenged his program, on and off the field. As their team GPA grew, so did the success. The Horns entered 2023 with hopes to win the Big 12 championship and reach the College

Football Playoff. But the first challenge was a trip to Tuscaloosa. The place where Sarkisian resurrected his coaching career would be the place the Longhorns returned to life.

“Our motto going into that game was, ‘win or die.’ When we land in Alabama, man, just take that plane back to Austin and leave us there because we’re not going home without a win,” Whittington said. “It was a statement game for us. We knew what it was, what everyone outside the program was saying about us. We weren’t trying to prove them wrong, though. We wanted to prove us right.”

The matchup against Alabama followed a familiar script for the Longhorns. They led 13-6 at halftime before the Crimson Tide stormed back to score 10 points in the third quarter and hold the lead in the fourth quarter. In the previous two years, Texas would’ve left the stadium with a loss. But this was a new Texas team. A tougher, more resilient brand of Longhorn. Texas won the fourth

quarter 21-8 and ran the ball down Alabama’s gullet late to ice the game and earn Sarkisian’s first marquee win as the head coach at Texas.

Texas went on to win the Big 12 championship in its final year in the conference and reach the College Football Playoff for the first time. The Longhorns waltzed into the SEC the next season and reached the conference title game and another semifinal in the College Football Playoff. Sarkisian isn’t satisfied, however. He learned from Carroll and Saban to keep the foot on the gas. After all, how you do anything is how you do everything. It is the motto of the Texas football program. The last rung on the ladder is a national championship. Sarkisian feels like the culture and toughness of his program allow that goal to be realistic.

Sarkisian and his staff made the deliberate decision to recruit winners after the 2023 season. Players from high school programs that cultivated the same culture and toughness required to win in the SEC. Texas was improving, illustrated by an 8-5 record and a higher GPA in 2022, but a 13-12 record over two years wasn’t the standard. Not anymore. Sarkisian laid the foundation and created a better culture. Now, his Horns needed to win.

The 2023 recruiting class at Texas was headlined by Arch Manning and littered with state champions. Anthony Hill from Denton Ryan. Malik Muhammad from South Oak Cliff. Quintrevion Wisner from DeSoto. Even players from elite programs outside the state of Texas like CJ Baxter, DeAndre Moore, and Liona Lefau.

“This group wants to be the team that gets over the hump,” Sarkisian said. “Now, we have a ton of work to do, but I do think there’s a mentality that you have to have to get it done and we have that mindset and pride within this locker room.”

Photo by Todd Kirkland, Getty Images



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SOMETHING



IN

BY CARTER YATES

THE

PHOTO BY JOHN DOUGHERTY

FROM LEFT: CELINA QB BOWE BENTLEY, COACH BILL ELLIOTT AND LB LUKE BIAGINI

ORANGE

IN CELINA, TRADITION HOLDS TIGHT AS THE HORIZON RUSHES IN

Bill Elliott's alarm blares at 3 a.m. Usually, he's already awake.

Every Celina High School workday starts with a weight-lifting session. Elliott has set the clock earlier each season since he was hired as an offensive line coach fresh out of college in 1992. Success makes the target on his back larger, and last December's 55-21 win over Kilgore was the eighth Celina state championship he's coached for.

James 'Choc' Christopher, his back-door neighbor of 22 years, swears Elliott's car headlights would flash through his bathroom window during his midnight pee. Jordan Roos, an NFL offensive lineman, remembers squatting and pressing a 400-pound barbell over his head before Coach Elliott did the same ... with more weight.

Elliott towers over the Celina players, an orange polo spread tight over muscles that have grown muscles. He's a devout Christian who'll never cuss, but nobody mistakes him as mild-mannered on the field. His face, permanently tanned from the Texas sun, runs red in the heat of battle, with every vein bulging. He's forever a TCU lineman who wishes he could line up in a three-point stance, too.

If Elliott looks like a Celina action figure, he cemented his hero status by winning the Class 4A Division I State Championship. Celina's first title since 2007 marked the return of a Texas high school football dynasty. But the Bobcats aren't just back, they're reborn.

Farm kids from a tiny town in North Texas earned the program's first eight trophies. The latest piece of hardware was the newest addition for a place whose population shot up 144% from 2019 to 2023. Celina has become what none of the townsfolk thought possible - Dallas' next booming suburb.

So far, the community has found strength in numbers, adding people who learn to revolve around Celina High School into their football-crazed orbit.

The Celina offense, headlined by four-star quarterback Bowe Bentley, scored 51.5 points per game. Bentley earned Offensive MVP in the state championship after passing for five touchdowns and five incompletions, one of which was a dropped touchdown pass. Seven defensive players made First Team All-District.

"That's the best Celina team I've ever seen play," said Rex Glendenning, a member of Celina's first state championship team in 1974. "On both sides of the ball, I think we had more talent

this year than any previous year."

But the town has outgrown the school that unifies them. High school classes are now held in the football team's film room. There's an active construction zone outside Celina's fieldhouse as the school expands from a 1,500-person to a 3,000-person capacity. In May, Celina voters approved a \$2.3 billion bond to open a second high school by 2030.

This may be the best football Celina has ever played. It's also the last few years that it'll do so as one team. It's as if the 2020s are Celina's golden hour, the final minutes of the day when the setting sun provides the best light for pictures to cherish forever.

That's why ending the mini-title drought has only made the town - and its players - hungrier for the next. They're trying to take as many state championship photos as possible before night falls. The Bobcats return Bentley and Defensive MVP Luke Biagini. Dave Campbell's Texas Football ranked them preseason No. 1 in Class 4A.

But Elliott can't hear any of that outside noise at 3 a.m. He reads his Bible inside the palace the community built for his team. There's a 70-yard indoor facility, two lecture-style film rooms, and, of course, that Division I-caliber weight room. It's a living testament to football's importance in Celina, and Elliott is one of three men who have held the keys since 1988.

The legendary G.A. Moore, who ranks third in TXHSFB history with 426 career wins, has a street named after him a mile down the road. He passed off his reign to defensive coordinator Butch Ford in the middle of a record 68-game winning streak in 2002. Ford went 122-16 with two titles before retiring in 2011.

Elliott is Celina's past and present; he played for Moore and Elliott in high school and has only ever coached for them. Every morning, he prays for guidance on leading it into the future.

When the sun rises today, the construction noises of Celina High School's expansion will start again. The hum of the generators and cement mixers constantly reminds Elliott he must work harder to keep this program in Moore and Ford's image. They built this dynasty in a town with one flashing light and a two-way road lined with tractors. The school district projects four high schools in the next two decades.

"At some point, not everybody is going to be

a Bobcat that lives in town," Christopher said. "Not everybody is going to be in orange and white."

Why does that matter? Why is Elliott proposing to the school board that every new high school have the Bobcat mascot and orange and white jerseys? Because those are rites of passage in this town - how boys grow into men.

Over a seven-year NFL career, Jordan Roos grew a beard to his chest and hair to his back. Celina has a haircut and no earring policy - all players are clean-shaven and wear their hair over the ears. For Elliott, it's a test. The program doesn't mean much to a kid if he won't give up an earring or get a haircut to be in it.

When Roos spoke to the team ahead of homecoming, he told them he'd shave his head tomorrow if he could come back and play for Celina.

"I wanted to get back and tell them how special it is," Roos said. "It's not like this everywhere. This isn't the norm. Celina is unique and uncommon."

Celina's program unofficially starts in second grade. Elliott and the varsity coaches host a yearly clinic for the Little League coaches. They run the high school's base offense and defense. All teams wear orange and white. Every boy in this town doesn't just dream of being a Bobcat; they grow up as one.

"(My favorite memories are) At the old Bobcat field, standing on the fence watching everyone warm up, and Coach Elliott coming and giving you a high five," quarterback Bowe Bentley said. "It was just the coolest thing ever."

It's like every boy goes through voluntary football indoctrination. Once they reach high school, they will not let the standard of the program they've always loved drop. Willpower, not scheme, was always Celina's secret sauce.

GA Moore created the famed 10-1 defense, with ten players along the line of scrimmage and

This may be the best football Celina has ever played. It's also the last few years that it'll do so as one team.



Photo by John Dougherty

a roaming middle linebacker seemingly making every tackle. Celina controlled the game with a smash-mouth rushing attack that was entirely one-dimensional.

Whether playing in a college stadium or nursing home, the Bobcats would outwork the opponent. The other team quit before the final buzzer sounded. The truth is Celina rarely had elite athletes. But every athlete had elite buy-in.

"Whenever you saw a Celina team running on the field, it looked like the other team was going to kick Celina's ass," Rex Glendenning said. "We never really did have the biggest kids or fastest kids. But they were disciplined and motivated kids who bought into the program and fought their hearts out."

Celina won four straight state championships in the late 90s and early 2000s. By then, the entire town was all in.

Moore had started a mentorship program within the booster group, the Celina Quarterback Club, where an adult male would be assigned a high school athlete to support with pregame snacks, gameday signs, or just a shoulder to lean on. In 2002, there were 80 men signed up to be mentors.

"Most of my buddies that go to games with me, our kids have been gone for 10-plus years out of high school," James 'Choc' Christopher said. "A

lot of us never had kids that even played football."

In August 2010, country music star Kenny Chesney's "Boys of Fall" video debuted on SportsCenter. Chesney and crew had traveled to America's most renowned high school football towns, an ode to Friday nights.

When Chesney sings, "In little towns like mine, it's all they got. Newspaper clippings fill the coffee shops," the quaint shop shown has "We Believe" in Celina orange spray-painted on the window, with Bobcat jerseys strung next to it. Inside, the framed newspaper reads, "Title push begins anew for the Bobcats."

Those lyrics perfectly depicted what Celina was for a long time. The spirit is still there - the downtown today has a 2024 state championship flag proudly displayed. It's just in front of a construction site for a new four-story parking garage, the first phase of the Downtown Center project.

The murmurs of a population boom began in 2011 when then-Mayor Corbett Howard informed the Celina ISD School Board of his growth projections.

"I didn't believe him to save my life," school board president Jeff Gravley said. "I thought, 'Yeah, we'll have an influx of people.' But not to the extent of what he was saying. Well, he was probably 50% low."

The Dallas North Tollway and Preston Road

are two major thoroughfares that run parallel. The area between them is called the 'Golden Corridor.' As construction brings those roads - and easy access to the city - north, boomtowns are created. There was Plano in the 1990s and Frisco in the 2000s. Now, it's Celina.

The roads explain the rapid growth from 2010 to 2020 when Celina went from 6,028 residents to 16,739. But the COVID-19 pandemic and the cultural headwinds it brought sent Celina into hyperdrive.

Strict lockdown orders in New York and California were the last nudge for people on the fence about moving to Texas. Rising inflation made the state's lack of state income tax and low cost of living attractive. The Dallas-Fort Worth airport made North Texas a convenient destination. Celina's school system made it a great spot to raise a family.

Now, Celina has 60,323 people. Everybody bought into the small-town dream and made it the fastest-growing city in America.

"No matter how much we prepare, it seems like we aren't doing enough," Gravley said.

Celina's football team, like the town, has modernized. In the 2000s, the team had two pass protection schemes - "Booby Left" and "Booby Right" - which told the linemen how to turn while the quarterback rolled out. In 2024, Bowe Bentley

threw for 3,211 yards and 47 touchdowns.

But the offensive evolution dates back to when Bill Elliott took over as head coach in 2012. His son, Nathan, was a rising sophomore who could spin it and had a good crop of wide receivers. Nathan's class flipped Celina's script. He finished his career with 8,821 yards and 110 touchdowns before playing at North Carolina.

Nathan, now Celina's offensive coordinator, is the last alum to play Power Four football. His protégé, Bentley, will soon snap the streak. Bentley went from zero scholarship offers to 30 in one season as the starting quarterback. Georgia, LSU and Oklahoma are his finalists.

"In my 32 years, we've never had a kid like him in this program," Bill Elliott said. "The arm talent, the ability to run, the vision, he is unbelievably talented."

Bentley represents the new Celina, but his work ethic is old-school Bobcat. He lives in the film room, a sponge for Nathan's knowledge from North Carolina.

"I knew I had to be different," Bentley said. "Getting my teammates up here to work on Saturdays and Sundays, no matter what day it was, 4:30 in the morning or 9 at night. We all had one dream: to win a state championship. We were going to do whatever it takes to accomplish it."

While Celina embraced the future with Bentley, they honored the past with two 1,000-yard running backs, Logan Gutierrez and Harrison Williams. The Bobcats still line up in the "T" formation - albeit not enough for some.

"I still wonder sometimes why they don't run the ball more," former head coach Butch Ford said.

But fans like Rex Glendenning appreciate that the program holds the same values as when he played. The Glendenning family has lived in Celina since 1887. Rex was on the first state championship team in 1974 and is still intimately involved with the program. Glendenning lines Preston Road with spray-painted hay bales before playoff games, as seen in the "Boys of Fall" video. He coached the Celina 7-on-7 team to four state titles.

Glendenning loves this town and program. But he's also the land broker who will profit from its change.

"Sometimes people ask me, 'Do you feel bad about all the growth around you?'" Glendenning said. "I kind of have to say, 'I've been envisioning this for three or four decades.'"

It's impossible to throw a football in Celina without hitting a "REX Real Estate" sign advertising a plot of land for sale. Every year since

1991, Glendenning bought a farm in Celina he deemed suitable for later development. From 2001-04, he served on the Dallas North Tollway extension committee that procured the rights from US 380 to Gunter. He waited for the people to come and the businesses that needed his land to follow.

By March 2023, D CEO Magazine featured him on its cover, entitled "The Land Man."

"Celina will be the biggest city in Collin County because we have a bigger footprint," Glendenning said. "We have 40% more dirt than Prosper and about 20% more dirt than Frisco."

The last of Plano High School's seven state championships was in 1994. Of the city's three high schools, Plano East is the only one with a winning season in the last six years. Frisco has 12 high schools and one state championship appearance (Lone Star) between them.

But what worries Elliott most in these early mornings by himself in the office - the community lost when more schools are added. The hard truth is that the more people hop in the boat, the harder it is to row in the same direction.

That's why Celina has a few team rules that will not change with time. Most involve an individual sacrifice for the team. Haircuts and no earrings are one. All players and coaches wear long white socks during the season. There is no off-season uniform, but orange, white and gray are required. Black clothing is forbidden, a tradition from an old rivalry with Pilot Point.

At this point, the rules are player-enforced. This spring, a freshman with a broken arm was sitting out offseason workouts when Ty Hughes, a departing senior center from the state championship team, approached Coach Elliott.

"Coach, what's that kid doing out there?" Hughes asked.

"Oh, he's a freshman," Elliott said. "He's hurt right now."

"He's got black on!" Hughes said.

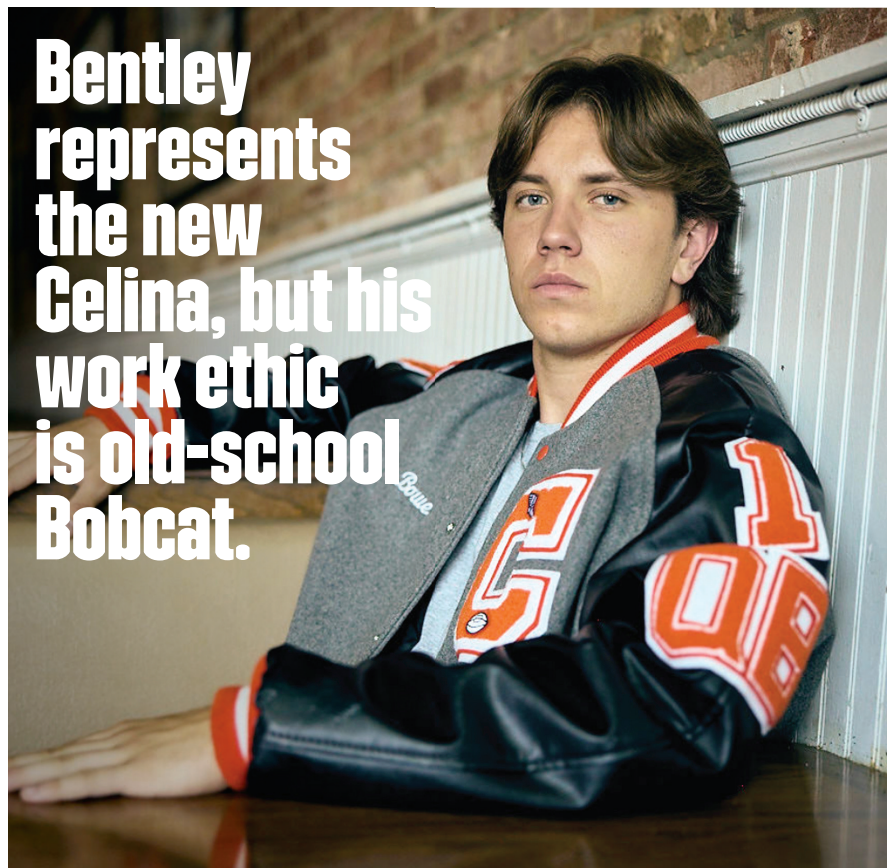
With that, Hughes, technically graduated from Celina football and off to West Texas A&M, walked out to the field and pulled the kid aside. He hasn't worn black since.

In these moments, Elliott wants to run through a brick wall - and into the future.

There's a framed note on Elliott's desk. He wrote it to his father when he was 9 years old, begging Dad to let him quit football. It was too hot. He was too chubby. His dad walked into his bedroom that night and told him that if he quit now, he'd quit the rest of his life.

Elliott tears up when he talks about this letter. His father's refusal is the reason he ever started coaching at Celina. It's also what's keeping him here.

Photo by John Dougherty



40 UNDER 40 Texas' Best Young Coaches

Austin **ARMSTRONG**

HOUSTON DC

Armstrong became a defensive coordinator in the SEC at 31 years old when he was hired by Florida in 2023. He arrives in Houston to take control of the Cougars' defense.



Matt **CANNATA**

LAMAR OL

Cannata has developed the Cardinals' offensive line into one of the top units in the Southland Conference, and this year's group may be his best yet.



Nick **GRAHAM**

UTSA CB

A former star cornerback himself, Graham is quickly becoming one of the top defensive back coaches at the G6 level. He helped develop Tariq Woolen and Zah Frazier into NFL Draft picks.



D'Eriq **KING**

SMU QB

A Texas high school football legend and former quarterback at Miami, King enters Year 2 as the quarterbacks coach at SMU.



Mitch **KIRSCH**

TCU TE

Kirsch arrived at TCU as an offensive analyst in 2021 and has worked his way up the ranks under Sonny Dykes, who he also worked for at SMU.



Collin **KLEIN**

TEXAS A&M OC

Texas A&M boasted the second-best rushing offense in the SEC in Klein's first year as play-caller in Aggieland. He was a Heisman finalist at Kansas State.



AJ **MILWEE**

TEXAS QB

Milwee helped Quinn Ewers lead Texas to back-to-back College Football Playoff berths and is now in charge of Arch Manning's development in Austin.



Darcel **McBATH**

TEXAS TECH CB

A Texas Tech graduate and longtime assistant under Mike Leach, McBath was previously coaching cornerbacks at Mississippi State before returning to his alma mater.



Mike **O'GUIN**

TEXAS STATE DL

O'Guin has turned the Texas State defensive line into a consistent and dynamic unit, developing underrated prospects into stars for the Bobcats and beyond.



Matt **POWLEDGE**

BAYLOR DC

Powledge has spent four of the past five years on Baylor's defensive staff. His Bears improved by 23 spots in total defense last season.



Michael **ROSAS**

TEXAS WESLEYAN CHIEF OF STAFF/LB

Rosas enters his ninth season with the Rams and has been instrumental in developing the Texas Wesleyan football program into a national power.



Sean **BROPHY**

NORTH TEXAS QB

One of the architects of a North Texas offense that finished 12th in passing in 2023 and fourth nationally last season. Both Mean Green quarterbacks passed for more than 3,000 yards.



Justin **RICHTER**

WEST TEXAS A&M DC

West Texas A&M's new defensive coordinator brings a record of success, having led a Missouri Southern defense that allowed just 25.8 points per game over four seasons.



Jerwin **WILSON**

TEXAS SOUTHERN WR

Regarded as one of the top high school recruiters in college football, Wilson has infused Texas Southern with talent since his arrival in 2019.



Brad **WILSON**

TEXAS A&M-KINGSVILLE OC

The Javelinas enter the 2025 season as Lone Star Conference title contenders following the addition of Wilson and head coach Scott Parr.



DC
TX

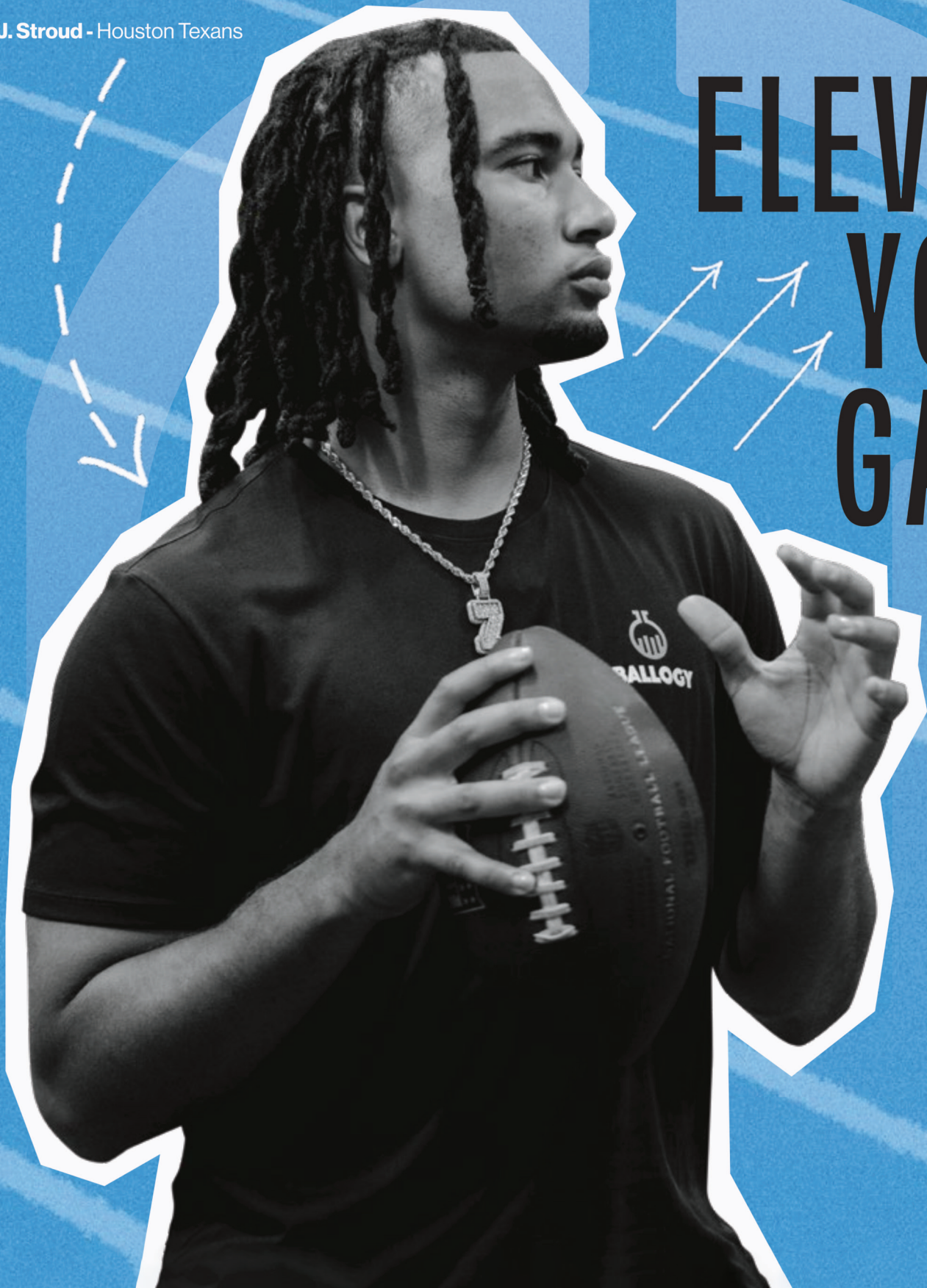
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Ricky BEATY

SALADO

Beaty, in year one at the helm in Salado, guided the Eagles to a 7-5 mark and their first playoff victory since 2020.



Greg DAVIS

WICHITA FALLS LEGACY

Davis gets his shot to be a head coach after spending time as an assistant at programs like Southlake Carroll, Katy, and Galena Park North Shore.



Scott FREEMAN

JUNCTION

Freeman, in his fourth season at the helm, led Junction to a 12-2 mark and their deepest playoff run since 2009.



Matthew GARCIA

SAN DIEGO

Alice native and former San Antonio Johnson DC Matthew Garcia, in his first head coaching gig, takes over one of South Texas' most underrated programs in 2025.



Brooks HAACK

HOUSTON MEMORIAL

The former Katy star QB and offensive coordinator at Richmond Randle takes over for legendary Gary Koch, who retired after 32 seasons leading the Mustangs.



Cornelius HARMON

ALDINE NIMITZ

Harmon has quietly built Aldine Nimitz into a perennial playoff team, posting a 21-11 record in three seasons. Before his arrival, the Cougars' last winning season was 2007.



CJ HANTZ

SAINT JO

After a successful run at Throckmorton, Hantz immediately kept it rolling at Saint Jo, taking the Panthers to their first 10-win season since 2019 in his first season.



David HAYNES JR.

WHITNEY

In three seasons at the controls in Hill County, Haynes Jr. has led Whitney to a 25-11 record, including a sensational 11-2 mark in 2023.



Jalen HELMS

BLANKET

Coaching is a family business for the Helms clan, and Jalen is the latest star in the making — he has Blanket trending way up after a successful inaugural season as head coach.



Glenn HILL

GERONIMO NAVARRO

Hill, who was part of his uncle Larry Hill's state championship staff at Smithson Valley, takes over a Navarro program that has become accustomed to winning in recent years.



Luke HOBBS

GIDDINGS

Hobbs, who took over at Giddings in January, spent the past two seasons at Schulenburg, where he posted a 13-10 record and led the Shorthorns to the area playoffs in 2024.



Kerry HYDER JR.

DALLAS BISHOP DUNNE

The former Austin LBJ, Texas Tech and NFL standout makes his head coaching debut with the Falcons, and he should turn the program around in a hurry.



Scott FREEMAN

Where Legends Begin

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Dave Campbell's
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40 UNDER 40

Collin ★
KLEIN 

Offensive Coordinator/Quarterbacks




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40 UNDER 40 Texas' Best Young Coaches

David JACKSON

FORT BEND CRAWFORD

Jackson, with no seniors, guided Fort Bend Crawford to a stunning playoff appearance in their first varsity season. With every player back in 2025, the Chargers could make noise.



Jordon RICKER

SAN ANTONIO MACARTHUR

Longtime Alamo Heights defensive coordinator Jordon Ricker looks to restore his alma mater to past glory in the Alamo City.



Frank MARTINEZ

EL PASO EL DORADO

In his fourth season leading the Aztecs, Martinez guided El Dorado to a 10-1 mark and an outright district championship in 2024.



Eric SOZA

ROCKPORT-FULTON

Soza, who took over in May of 2024, led the Pirates to a playoff win and a more-than-respectable 7-5 record in his head coaching debut.



Tyler MOORE

PROSPER

Despite incredible growth and two new high schools opening recently in Prosper ISD, Moore has kept Prosper High strong, posting an 18-5 record in two seasons.



Mike TREVINO

LYTLE

Trevino, in two seasons at Lytle, has posted a 12-9 record. In the previous two seasons combined, Lytle posted just one victory.



Blake MOUSER

TOLAR

Mouser, in his head coaching debut, took over a Tolar team that moved up to 3A Division II and still posted a stellar 11-2 overall record.



Eric WARD

LUBBOCK ESTACADO

The former Texas Tech star didn't take over at Estacado until mid-June, and despite the late start, he led the Matadors to a 7-5 record and an area-round playoff appearance.



Jimmy MOYNAHAN

BELLAIRE EPISCOPAL

A Boston native, Moynahan made his way to Texas by way of Ohio and took over at one of Houston's most talent-rich programs, anxious to get them back to SPC contention.



Terrance ORR

MESQUITE POTEET

The Orr name is well known in DFW, and the former Hebron offensive coordinator gets his shot to be a head coach as he looks to turn Mesquite Poteet around.



Earnest PENA

WEST COLUMBIA

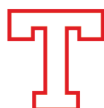
Pena, who took over the Roughnecks program in 2023, led Columbia to an 8-4 record and a bi-district title in 2024.



Chad PRESIDENT

TEMPLE

Temple legend Chad President gets his shot to be a head coach at his alma mater after spending 2024 as the Wildcats' offensive coordinator.



Eli REINHART

HUTTO

Reinhart was the offensive coordinator for North Crowley's 6A Division I title team in 2024. He returns to Central Texas (where he spent time as an assistant) for his first head coaching gig.



Eric SOZA

Photo Credit: Blake Puredell

Where Legends Begin

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Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

AROUND THE STATE
40 UNDER 40



Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

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40

JAMES BLANCHARD

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THE NO. 1 TRANSFER PORTAL CLASS IN THE COUNTRY THIS OFFSEASON**

Preseason Super Team **OFFENSE**

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**SUPER TEAM
OFFENSE**



KJ **EDWARDS**

After guiding Carthage to the 4A Division II state championship, the Bulldogs' running back is our pick for Super Team Offensive MVP.

Photo Credit: Jeff Dahlia

Keisean **HENDERSON**

QB | 6-4, 180 | LEGACY SCHOOL

Henderson is the highest-rated Houston commit of all time and was selected as Dave Campbell's first five-star in 2026. The QB/ATH will bring a new level of excitement to Space City, powered by dual-threat playmaking instincts and leadership. Henderson is a game-changer who has the potential to elevate the program to new heights.



Brock **BOYD**

WR | 6-1, 170 | SOUTHLAKE CARROLL

Boyd is a refined route-runner with exceptional separation and top-end explosiveness. He's already a problem outside, but his shiftiness and football smarts make him equally dangerous in the slot. No real holes in his game—he's a plug-and-play pass-catcher built for modern offenses. He'll be the next big star receiver.



Tradarian **BALL**

RB | 5-10, 185 | TEXARKANA

Ball is a nightmare matchup with eye-popping acceleration and true positional versatility. Whether split out wide or taking handoffs, he hits full gear in a blink and leaves defenders flat-footed. A 1,000-yard receiver with running back instincts, he's built to stress defenses in space and flip the field in an instant.



Ethan **FEASTER**

WR | 6-2, 180 | DeSOTO

Feaster reclassified to graduate early, fast-tracking his path to college football. The DeSoto standout will be a three-year varsity starter after becoming Claude Mathis' first-ever freshman to start at receiver. With 45 FBS offers, his massive catch radius, frame, and physical maturity make him a matchup problem on the outside.



KJ **EDWARDS**

RB | 5-9, 175 | CARTHAGE

Edwards is a dynamic, no-nonsense runner with over 4,000 career rushing yards and two state titles to show for it. Named Offensive MVP in the 4A Division II championship, he's a cut-and-go specialist with rapid change-of-direction. With 30+ offers, his big-play résumé speaks for itself.



Jalen **LOTT**

WR | 6-0, 170 | FRISCO PANTHER CREEK

Lott's physical growth has caught up to his elite athleticism, turning him into a true matchup nightmare. He's twitchy, tracks the ball well, and consistently finishes above the rim. A state champ in the long jump with a high football IQ, he's a threat at all three levels of the field.



Drew **EVERS**

OL | 6-4, 285 | FLOWER MOUND

A true five-position offensive lineman, Evers is a day-one option wherever needed. With 40 FBS offers, his roster flexibility makes him invaluable. He moves well enough to stick at tackle but has the smarts and athleticism to slide inside or even snap at center. Coaches love his versatility.



Zaden **KREMPIN**

OL | 6-5, 270 | PROSPER

One of the most technically advanced linemen in the class, and also happens to be the state's most heavily offered prospect. He's a natural at both tackle spots but could also thrive inside, thanks to his instincts and power. His polish and 6A experience makes early college snaps a real possibility.



Felix **OJO**

OL | 6-6, 285 | MANSFIELD LAKE RIDGE

Ojo checks the early boxes for a premier blindside protector — length, lateral movement, and youth. Still growing into his frame, he shined at the Navy All-American Bowl and has the raw traits that make offensive line coaches salivate. With continued off-field development, his upside screams future NFL left tackle.



Nicolas **ROBERTSON**

OL | 6-3, 330 | KLEIN

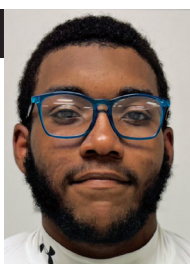
A dominant edge-setter on Friday nights, this Under Armour All-American anchors the offensive line at tackle in high school but is committed to Texas, where he projects to move inside. His explosive first step, powerful punch, and physicality in the trenches give him the tools to thrive at guard or center.



John **TURNTINE III**

OL | 6-4, 275 | NORTH CROWLEY

Turntine jumps off the screen with rare twitch for a lineman, routinely reaching the second level like a tight end in disguise. The 6A DI state champ is a developmental gem with multi-position potential. He'll need added bulk, but his agility and motor suggest future starter flexibility across the line.



Davian **GROCE**

UT | 6-2, 190 | FRISCO LONE STAR

A day-one starter as a freshman, the Navy All-American and DCTF four-star is a dynamic playmaker with rare positional versatility. He's a threat to score on any touch — whether shaking defenders as a route runner when split out at wide receiver or slicing through defenses from the backfield.



SUPER TEAM | OFFENSE

SECOND TEAM

Pos	Name	HT	WT	High School
QB	Bowe Bentley	6-2	200	Celina
RB	Jonathan Hatton Jr.	6-0	205	Cibola Steele
RB	Javian Osborne	5-10	190	Forney
WR	Chase Campbell	6-0	180	Wolfforth Frenship
WR	Jayden Warren	6-2	185	Iowa Colony
TE	Ryder Mix	6-4	225	Frisco Lone Star
OL	Noah Best	6-4	290	Midlothian
OL	Bryce Gilmore	6-4	275	Prosper
OL	Avery Morcho	6-6	270	Fort Bend Ridge Point
OL	Aaron Wolford	6-4	285	Port Neches-Groves
OL	Max Wright	6-8	310	Melissa
UT	Ryelan Morris	5-9	170	Honey Grove

THIRD TEAM

Pos	Name	HT	WT	High School
QB	Jake Fette	6-0	190	El Paso Del Valle
RB	Christian Rhodes	6-1	200	Lake Highlands
WR	Jordan Clay	6-3	195	San Antonio Madison
WR	Kaydon Finley	6-1	190	Aledo
WR	London Smith	6-0	175	Waco University
TE	Zachery Turner	6-3	215	Duncanville
OL	Pupunagatoa Katoa	6-4	370	Eules Trinity
OL	Jerald Mays	6-3	275	Pflugerville Weiss
OL	Day'jon Moore	6-3	305	Willis
OL	Devan Robison	6-3	315	Pasadena Memorial
OL	Cortavious Tisaby	6-6	300	South Oak Cliff
UT	Xzavier Barnett	6-3	185	Yoakum



DCTF

DAVE CAMPBELL'S
TEXAS FOOTBALL

SUPER TEAMS
OFFENSE





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THE TRADITION AFTER
The Tradition
ON FRIDAY NIGHTS.



WHATABURGER. PROUDLY SUPPORTS DAVE CAMPBELL'S TEXAS FOOTBALL

Preseason Super Team **DEFENSE**

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Dave Campbell's
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SUPER TEAMS
DEFENSE



Jermaine **BISHOP**

A two-way dynamo for Willis, the Wildkats' star is one of the brightest prospects in the Class of 2026, and our pick for Super Team Defensive MVP.

Photo Credit: Chicks Lily

Jamarion **CARLTON**

DL | 6-5, 240 | TEMPLE

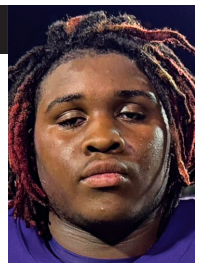
Carlton boasts developmental upside with a frame and skill set that project elite growth. Already dominant, his ceiling skyrockets once he enters a college strength program. Already a Navy All-American Bowl alum, he flashes traits that scream future first-rounder — long, athletic, and raw with explosive potential just around the bend.



Jaimeon **WINFIELD**

DL | 6-3, 290 | RICHARDSON

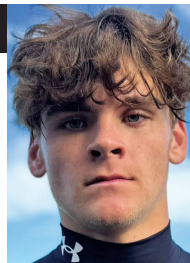
Winfield dominates the interior with raw violence and freakish get-off. His highlight reel is pure chaos — think Ed Oliver in high school pads. If he masters pad level and consistency, he's nearly unblockable. Few big men flash this kind of backfield burst, and even fewer carry that level of upside.



Jesse **FORD**

DL | 6-4, 235 | ARLINGTON MARTIN

Ford brings edge-setting power and the long-frame traits college coaches covet. The Dave Campbell's four-star blends run-stuffing grit with pass-rush upside. He's still growing, both physically and technically, but his foundation suggests a future strongside anchor who can set the edge and close pockets with force.



Landon **BARNES**

EDGE | 6-3, 220 | DUNCANVILLE

Barnes is a unique talent — an athletic hybrid who defies strict positional labels. He can rush the passer, play the run and drop into coverage without coming off the field. Whether standing up or hand-in-the-dirt, his versatility, twitch, and range make him an edge-rushing nightmare.



KJ **FORD**

DL | 6-3, 245 | DUNCANVILLE

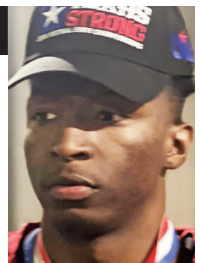
Ford is a rare edge talent with jaw-dropping first-step quickness that jumps off the tape—especially in the opening clips of his highlight reel. As one of the first underclassmen to ever play in the Under Armour All-America Game, he notched a sack and proved his burst holds against elite competition.



Daquives **BECK**

LB | 6-1, 210 | CARTHAGE

The four-star from East Texas is a powerful, scheme-versatile defender who can play inside or outside in any front. He was named Defensive MVP of the 4A Division II state title game and returns to lead a loaded 2025 defense. Beck is a tone-setter who doesn't miss tackles and delivers consistent physicality.



Tank KING

LB | 6-2, 205 | PORT ARTHUR MEMORIAL

One of the most reliable tacklers in Texas. King posted 141 stops in 2024, showcasing his ability to read keys, shed blocks and finish plays. King's instincts and discipline make him one of the most complete linebackers in the class and a dependable presence at the heart of any defense.



Chace CALICUT

DB | 6-3, 190 | GALENA PARK NORTH SHORE

Calicut is North Shore's next defensive headliner. His blend of length and anticipation allows him to erase passing windows from center field. A technician in deep coverage with the frame to bully receivers at the catch point, he brings controlled aggression and advanced instincts that make him a future difference-maker.



Jamarion VINCENT

DB | 6-2, 165 | WACO CONNALLY

Vincent is a versatile athlete who will lead the offense at quarterback in 2025, but his long-term upside is at cornerback. He's widely recognized as one of the top cover men in Texas with loose hips, quick feet, and long arms that help him mirror receivers and erase throwing windows.



Donovan WEBB

DB | 6-0, 175 | FRISCO PANTHER CREEK

Webb's highlight tape is must-see, but he's even more impressive in person. A rangy, physical safety who could realistically play corner, his instincts and coverage are elite. A two-way threat with All-State honors, The Under Armour Next DB MVP flashes physical upside. He's a tone-setting defensive back who makes everything look easy.



Isaiah WILLIAMS

DB | 6-0, 185 | FORT BEND MARSHALL

Williams plays safety with aggression and control. A punisher in the middle, he made such an impact as a sophomore that teams schemed away from him in 2024. He still popped. Strong in coverage with highlight-reel hits, he's the tone-setter you avoid — or pay for challenging — a flat-out violent striker.



Jermaine BISHOP

UT | 5-11, 160 | WILLIS

Bishop is a three-phase playmaker with limitless versatility. He impacts the game on offense, defense and special teams — often looking like the best player on the field. Some recruiters mention Travis Hunter, and it's not a stretch. Bishop's competitive edge and all-around skillset make him one of Texas' most unique talents.



SUPER TEAM | DEFENSE

SECOND TEAM

Pos	Name	HT	WT	High School
DL	Carter Buck	6-6	240	Lake Travis
DL	Julian Hugo	6-4	230	Cibolo Steele
DL	Jake Johnson	6-3	285	Prosper
DL	Alister Vallejo	6-3	270	Liberty Hill
EDGE	Jaylen Stewart	6-2	230	Pearland
LB	Kosi Okpala	6-2	215	Katy Mayde Creek
LB	Jamarion Phillips	6-0	220	South Oak Cliff
DB	Jordan Deck	6-3	185	Frisco Lone Star
DB	Braylon Edwards	6-0	185	Duncanville
DB	Markel Ford	6-0	185	DeSoto
DB	Yaheim Riley	6-0	180	Austin Anderson
UT	Paris Melvin Jr.	5-11	170	Cypress Springs

THIRD TEAM

Pos	Name	HT	WT	High School
DL	Daryl Campbell	6-3	315	Katy Paetow
DL	Maddox Flynt	6-1	275	Austin Westlake
DL	Tiki Hola	6-3	270	Bastrop
DL	Kordae Houston	6-2	270	South Oak Cliff
EDGE	Hudson Woods	6-3	230	Smithson Valley
LB	Tieson Ejiawoko	6-2	220	Georgetown East View
LB	Calvin Thomas	6-3	210	Cypress Ranch
DB	Jason Bradford	6-2	195	Temple
DB	Ryan Gilbert II	5-11	175	North Forney
DB	Marcell Gipson	5-11	175	South Oak Cliff
DB	Xavier Harmon	6-2	185	Conroe
UT	Stryker Reed	6-0	190	Gordon



DC
TX

TEXAS FOOTBALL
Dave Campbell's

SUPER TEAMS
DEFENSE

All-Texas College **OFFENSE**

DC
TX

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TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
ALL TEXAS



BEST QUARTERBACK

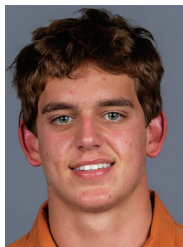
Arch Manning, Texas



BEST RUNNING BACK

Bryson Washington, Baylor

FIRST-TEAM OFFENSE



QB
ARCH
MANNING
TEXAS



RB
BRYSON
WASHINGTON
BAYLOR



RB
LE'VEON
MOSS
TEXAS A&M



WR
CALEB
DOUGLAS
TEXAS TECH



WR
JOSH
CAMERON
BAYLOR



WR
DeANDRE
MOORE
TEXAS



TE
RJ
MARYLAND
SMU



OL
TREY
ZUHN
TEXAS A&M



OL
ARMAJ
REED-ADAMS
TEXAS A&M



OL
DJ
CAMPBELL
TEXAS



OL
LOGAN
PARR
SMU



OL
HOWARD
SAMPSON
TEXAS TECH



UTL
DEAN
CONNORS
HOUSTON



K
RANDY
BOND
TEXAS A&M

All-Texas College **OFFENSE**



BEST WIDE RECEIVER
Caleb Douglas, Texas Tech



BEST OFFENSIVE LINEMAN
Trey Zuhn, Texas A&M

SECOND-TEAM OFFENSE



QB
SAWYER
ROBERTSON
BAYLOR



RB
CJ
BAXTER
TEXAS



RB
LINCOLN
PAIRE
TEXAS STATE



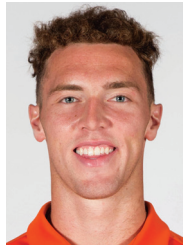
WR
KC
CONCEPCION
TEXAS A&M



WR
ERIC
McALISTER
TCU



WR
COY
EAKIN
TEXAS TECH



TE
HOUSTON
THOMAS
UTSA



OL
OMAR
AIGBEDION
BAYLOR



OL
COLTIN
DEERY
TCU



OL
HUNTER
ZAMBRANO
TEXAS TECH



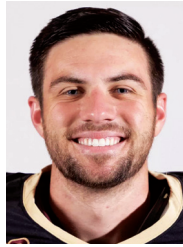
OL
PJ
WILLIAMS
SMU



OL
TREVOR
GOOSBY
TEXAS



UTL
KAM
THOMAS
UTEP



K
MASON
SHIPLEY
TEXAS

All-Texas College **DEFENSE**

DC
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Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
ALL TEXAS



BEST DEFENSIVE LINEMAN
Colin Simmons, Texas

Photo Credit: Texas Athletics



BEST LINEBACKER
Anthony Hill Jr., Texas

Photo Credit: Texas Athletics

FIRST-TEAM DEFENSE



DE
COLIN
SIMMONS
TEXAS



DT
ALBERT
REGIS
TEXAS A&M



DT
LEE
HUNTER
TEXAS TECH



DE
DeVEAN
DEAL
TCU



LB
ANTHONY
HILL JR.
TEXAS



LB
JACOB
RODRIGUEZ
TEXAS TECH



LB
KEATON
THOMAS
BAYLOR



CB
MALIK
MUHAMMAD
TEXAS



CB
WILL
LEE III
TEXAS A&M



S
MICHAEL
TAAFFE
TEXAS



S
ISAIAH
NWOKOBIA
SMU



UTL
TAUREAN
YORK
TEXAS A&M



P
LIAM
DOUGHERTY
HOUSTON

All-Texas College **DEFENSE**



BEST DEFENSIVE BACK
Michael Taaffe, Texas



BEST SPECIALIST
Randy Bond, Texas A&M

SECOND-TEAM DEFENSE



DE
CASHIUS
HOWELL
TEXAS A&M



DT
JACKIE
MARSHALL
BAYLOR



DT
TERRY
WEBB
SMU



DE
DAVID
BAILEY
TEXAS TECH



LB
TRAVION
BARNES
BAYLOR



LB
NAMDI
OBIAZOR
TCU



LB
TY
MORRIS
RICE



CB
DEUCE
HARMON
SMU



CB
DAVID
FISHER
NORTH TEXAS



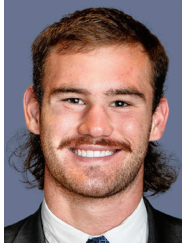
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**PLAYOFF
QUARTERFINAL**



THE ROAD TO THE CHAMPIONSHIP RUNS THROUGH ARLINGTON

THE CFP PLAYOFF QUARTERFINAL AT THE 90TH GOODYEAR COTTON BOWL CLASSIC
KICKOFF 6:30 P.M. | WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2025 | **ESPN**

GOODYEARCOTTONBOWL.COM |     



COLLEGE

SMU receiver Derrick McFall steps through a tackle attempt by Cal defensive back Miles Williams — himself a Texan — during the Mustangs' 38–6 win over the Bears. McFall is expected to be a major contributor to the Ponies' offense in 2025 after scoring two rushing touchdowns as a freshman.

Photo by Jennifer Choate

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TX

Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE

Texas FBS **POWER POLL**

DC
TX

Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
POWER POLL

1



TEXAS LONGHORNS The Horns hand the keys to Arch Manning after consecutive trips to the semifinals of the College Football Playoff. They are a combined 25-5 over the last two seasons and enter 2025 as one of the betting favorites to claim the national title.

2



TEXAS TECH RED RAIDERS The Red Raiders went all-in heading into 2025 with one of the best transfer portal classes and a pair of new, hotshot coordinators. Tech hopes to claim its first conference championship since 1976.

3



TEXAS A&M AGGIES The Aggies lost their final four games against Power Four competition in Year 1 of the Mike Elko era. The schedule is even tougher in 2025 as Texas A&M bets on quarterback Marcel Reed and a strong offensive line.

4



SMU MUSTANGS Quarterback Kevin Jennings returns as the Mustangs try to replicate a Cinderella run to the ACC championship and College Football Playoff in Year 2 as a Power Four program. SMU has won 54 games since 2019, most in Texas.

5



BAYLOR BEARS Baylor won six straight to close the regular season last year as Dave Aranda staved off termination. His Bears return their starting quarterback, running back, top wide receiver, and four of the five starters along the offensive line.

6



TCU HORNED FROGS Josh Hoover returns to lead a high-octane offense that hopes to provide more balance in the run game. The Horned Frogs should benefit from Year 2 under defensive coordinator Andy Avalos. They won six of their last seven in 2024.

7



HOUSTON COUGARS Willie Fritz's program hit the reset button after Year 1 by replacing both coordinators and adding over a dozen potential new starters in the transfer portal, including former five-star quarterback Conner Weigman.

8



UTSA ROADRUNNERS The Roadrunners could return to conference contention because Owen McCown might be the best quarterback in the AAC and he has plenty of help at the skill positions. The UTSA defense lost a lot of experience and production on defense.

9



NORTH TEXAS MEAN GREEN A favorable in-conference schedule that doesn't include Memphis or Tulane coupled with the hiring of defensive coordinator Skyler Cassity could set up the Mean Green for a run at the AAC crown in Year 3 under Eric Morris.

10



TEXAS STATE BOBCATS G.J. Kinne has led Texas State to eight wins in both seasons in charge of the Bobcats and holds the program's only two bowl victories. The next step for Texas State is competing for a Sun Belt West crown.

11



UTEP MINERS The Miners have signed the top recruiting class in Conference USA in consecutive cycles to start the Scotty Walden era. The Miners won two of their last three conference games to close 2024 and expect to go bowling in 2025.

12



RICE OWLS Rice wanted a new head coach that ran a unique offensive system and held previous experience winning at elite academic institutions and the Owls found just that in Scott Abell, who brings his unique option attack to South Main.

13



SAM HOUSTON BEARKATS Former Bearkat offensive coordinator and Air Raid disciple Phil Longo returns to Huntsville after head coach after K.C. Keeler took the Temple job. Repeating the 10-win season of 2024 is a tough challenge with a new roster.

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Heisman **HOPEFULS**

FAVORITES



Arch Manning, QB
Texas

Photo Credit: Texas Athletics

CONTENDERS



LaNorris Sellers, QB
South Carolina

Photo Credit: South Carolina Athletics

DARK HORSES



DJ Lagway, QB
Florida

Photo Credit: USA/Catherine McCarthy



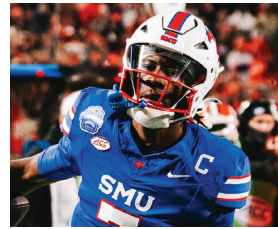
Garrett Nussmeier, QB
LSU

Photo Credit: LSU Athletics



Dante Moore, QB
Oregon

Photo Credit: Eric Evans/Goldducks.com



KJ Jennings, QB
SMU

Photo Credit: SMU Athletics



Cade Klubnik, QB
Clemson

Photo Credit: Clemson Athletics/David Wald



Caleb Downs, S
Ohio State

Photo Credit: Ohio State Athletics



Sam Leavitt, QB
Arizona State

Photo Credit: Thomas Fernandez



Jeremiah Smith, WR
Ohio State

Photo Credit: Ohio State Athletics



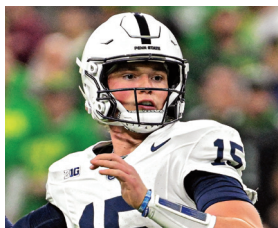
Jeremiah Love, RB
Notre Dame

Photo Credit: Notre Dame Athletics



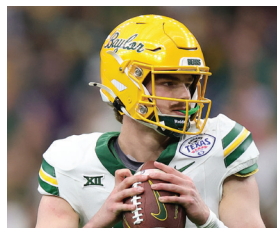
Carson Beck, QB
Miami

Photo Credit: Miami Athletics



Drew Allar, QB
Penn State

Photo Credit: Penn State Athletics



Sawyer Robertson, QB
Baylor

Photo Credit: Alex Slitz/Getty Images



John Mateer, QB
Oklahoma

Photo Credit: Morgan Grens/OU Athletics

DCTF'S TAKE

TOP 25

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------|
| 1. Texas | 14. Florida |
| 2. Clemson | 15. Texas A&M |
| 3. Penn State | 16. Kansas State |
| 4. Notre Dame | 17. SMU |
| 5. Alabama | 18. Ole Miss |
| 6. LSU | 19. BYU |
| 7. Georgia | 20. Oklahoma |
| 8. Oregon | 21. Illinois |
| 9. Ohio State | 22. Michigan |
| 10. South Carolina | 23. Iowa State |
| 11. Arizona State | 24. Baylor |
| 12. Texas Tech | 25. Indiana |
| 13. Miami | |

BOWL PREDICTIONS

Cotton Bowl (Quarterfinal)
Texas vs. Oregon

Orange Bowl (Quarterfinal)
Clemson vs. Georgia

Rose Bowl (Quarterfinal)
Penn State vs. LSU

Sugar Bowl (Quarterfinal)
Notre Dame vs. Alabama

Fiesta Bowl (Semifinal)
Texas vs. Notre Dame

Peach Bowl (Semifinal)
Penn State vs. Clemson

CFP National Championship
Texas over Clemson

Alamo Bowl
Arizona State vs. Utah

Frisco Bowl
Texas State vs. Army

Sun Bowl
Louisville vs. Colorado

Armed Forces Bowl
UTSA vs. Troy

Texas Bowl
TCU vs. Oklahoma

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COLLEGE
WRITER'S POLL

	SAM KHAN JR. <i>The Athletic</i>	GREG LUCA <i>San Antonio Express-News</i>	DAVE WILSON <i>ESPN</i>	TRAVIS L. BROWN <i>KBTX</i>	CHRIS HUMMER <i>247Sports/CBS Sports</i>	ZACH BARNETT <i>FootballScoop</i>	MIKE CRAVEN <i>DCTF</i>	BILL CONNELLY <i>ESPN</i>	ALEX KIRSHNER <i>Split Zone Duo</i>
Who is the best FBS head coach in Texas?	Steve Sarkisian, Texas	Steve Sarkisian, Texas	Jeff Traylor, UTSA	Rhett Lashlee, SMU	Steve Sarkisian, Texas	Steve Sarkisian, Texas	Steve Sarkisian, Texas	Rhett Lashlee, SMU	Steve Sarkisian, Texas
By the end of the season, which Texas coach's seat will be the hottest?	Scotty Walden, UTEP	Dave Aranda, Baylor	Joey McGuire, Texas Tech	Dave Aranda, Baylor	Dave Aranda, Baylor	Sonny Dykes, TCU	Eric Morris, North Texas	Eric Morris, North Texas	Sonny Dykes, TCU
Which true freshman will have the biggest impact at a Texas program this year?	Jerome Myles, Texas A&M	Jerome Myles, Texas A&M	Justus Terry, Texas	Kaliq Lockett, Texas	Jerome Myles, Texas A&M	Kiotti Armstrong, Texas A&M	Kaliq Lockett, Texas	Kaliq Lockett, Texas	Justus Terry, Texas
Which transfer will have the biggest impact at a Texas program this year?	Conner Weigman, Houston	David Bailey, Texas Tech	KC Concepcion, Texas A&M	KC Concepcion, Texas A&M	Conner Weigman, Houston	Quinten Joyner, Texas Tech	Lee Hunter, Texas Tech	David Bailey, Texas Tech	Romello Height, Texas Tech
Who will win the Heisman Trophy?	Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State	Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State	Cade Klubnik, Clemson	Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State	Cade Klubnik, Clemson	DJ Lagway, Florida	Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State	Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State	Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State
Who will win the ACC?									
Who will win the Big 12?									
Who will win the SEC?									
Who will win the AAC?									
Who will win Conference USA?									
Who will win the CFP National Championship?									

GIVE US YOUR HOTTEST TAKE FOR THE 2025 COLLEGE FOOTBALL SEASON, IN 10 WORDS OR LESS ...

CLEMSON WILL MAKE THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP GAME Sam Khan Jr., *The Athletic*
 THE CFP BRACKET WILL BE EVEN MORE PROBLEMATIC AND IMBALANCED Greg Luca, *San Antonio Express-News*
 THE BILL BELICHICK EXPERIMENT WILL LAST ONE YEAR AT UNC Dave Wilson, *ESPN*
 FIRST YEAR OF REVENUE SHARING MAKES THIS SEASON VERY CHALKY Travis L. Brown, *KBTX*
 QB'S FROM TEXAS OR IN TEXAS (KLUBNIK, MANNING, NUSSMEIER)
 FINISH 1-2-3 IN THE HEISMAN BALLOT Chris Hummer, *247Sports/CBS Sports*
 CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, THIS SPORT IS NOT DYING Zach Barnett, *FootballScoop.com*
 THE BIG TEN CLAIMS THIRD STRAIGHT NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP
 WITH THIRD DIFFERENT PROGRAM Mike Craven, *DCTF*
 2026 LONGHORNS OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR SONNY DYKES Alex Kirshner, *Split Zone Duo* podcast
 MATT PATRICIA WAS A TERRIBLE HIRE AT OHIO STATE Bill Connelly, *ESPN*

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Southeastern CONFERENCE

BY CARTER YATES

IN A DOGFIGHT WITH THE BIG 10, CAN THE SEC RE-ESTABLISH DOMINANCE?

College football is a tale of two kings between the SEC and the Big Ten. Both have competing claims to the throne.

The Big Ten's best is better than the rest. It boasts the past two national champions and had four teams in the 2024 College Football Playoff to the SEC's three. The Big Ten also went 5-1 head-to-head in the postseason against the SEC.

But the SEC has strength in numbers. Five SEC teams are ranked in Dave Campbell's Preseason Top 10 compared to the Big Ten's three.

One thing's for sure, the SEC's days as the undisputed best conference are on pause. **Texas (13-3, 7-1)** and **Georgia (11-3, 6-2)** have the best odds to reclaim the belt with a national championship, even though they each lost a conference-best 14 players to the NFL Draft.

Steve Sarkisian is a popular pick to become the fourth active coach to win a title after his Longhorns fell one game short of reaching the championship in back-to-back seasons. Texas had a chance to tie those semifinal games deep in the fourth quarter on red zone fourth downs. Longhorn fans believe Arch Manning will be the difference after spending two years as college football's most famous backup quarterback. Whether they're right is to be determined.

Texas will need to slay the Georgia giant after going 0-2 against them last season. Kirby Smart led his Bulldogs to their fifth consecutive SEC Championship Game, but this version was far more frustrating given the program's sky-high standards. Georgia had the most dropped passes in the Power Four and finished next-to-last in the SEC in rushing yards per game. Smart hopes wide receiver transfers Noah Thomas (Texas A&M) and Zachariah Branch (USC) are quick fixes for his football machine.

Tennessee (10-3, 6-2) and **South Carolina (9-4, 5-3)** have coaches who reached new heights for their programs in their fourth seasons. Josh Heupel led the Volunteers to their first CFP berth, while Shane Beamer has won more games (29) in four years with the Gamecocks than any other coach in school history.

Both programs thought they had rising stars at quarterback. Don't worry, South Carolina fans; quarterback LaNorris Sellers returns after earning SEC Freshman of the Year honors with over 3,200 total yards and 25 touchdowns. But Tennessee quarterback Nico Iamaleava held out of spring practice while attempting to renegotiate his NIL deal, believing his once-historic \$8 million contract signed as a five-star

prep recruit was outdated. Head coach Josh Heupel told him he could get a better deal... on another team.

Meanwhile, the head coaches at **LSU (9-4, 5-3)** and **Alabama (9-4, 5-3)** are entering prove-it years.

Brian Kelly left Notre Dame for Baton Rouge because he wanted 'to be in an environment where I have the resources to win a national championship.' The Fighting Irish reached the title game last season. If Kelly doesn't win it all this year, he'll be the first LSU head coach in the 21st century to not win a national title in his first four seasons. Quarterback Garrett Nussmeier is the SEC's returning leader in passing yards, but Kelly's tenure has been plagued by a leaky defense. All-SEC linebacker Whit Weeks and a healthy Harold Perkins Jr. could help the unit rebound.

Kalen DeBoer hopped into the Alabama pressure cooker created by Nick Saban, the greatest college football coach ever. Failing to win double-digit games for the first time since 2007 only raised more eyebrows. DeBoer is reuniting with his offensive coordinator, Ryan Grubb.

The pair coached Washington to the national championship in 2023 behind a record-setting passing offense. That's music to sophomore wide receiver Ryan Williams' ears after an All-American season.

While Alabama is in danger of not reaching 10 wins in back-to-back seasons for the first time in over a decade, **Ole Miss (10-3, 5-3)** had its first consecutive 10-win seasons since 1959-60. But after losing an SEC best four First Team all-conference picks (and ranking 113th in the nation in returning production), will history say the Rebels missed their best chance for the CFP in 2024? Not if the Portal King Lane Kiffin struck gold again with the No.3-ranked transfer class.

Missouri's (10-3, 5-3) Eliah Drinkwitz seeks to become the first coach in school history with three consecutive 10-win seasons. He's taking a Kiffin-like approach in rebuilding his defense through the transfer portal. Georgia edge rusher Damon Wilson II was the No.2-ranked transfer in the country, while West Virginia linebacker Josiah Trotter was the Big 12 Defensive Freshman of the Year.



2

Photo Credit: USAA/Lorenzo Vasquez

DJ LAGWAY

The 2023 Mr. Texas Football Player of the Year made an immediate impact for the Florida Gators, and could be in for an even bigger 2025.

Southeastern **CONFERENCE**

On the other hand, **Texas A&M (8-5, 5-3)** leads the SEC by returning 71 percent of its production. The first season of the Mike Elko era was a success: the Aggies were one game away from the SEC Championship Game. But a 1-4 skid to close the year leaves them motivated for more. Texas A&M's run-heavy attack should get a boost from the healthy returns of Le'Veon Moss (906 all-purpose yards before a season-ending injury) and Rueben Owens (sidelined until Week 14). However, Elko's biggest focus will be improving a defense that he said 'can't cover the forward pass well enough to be a good football team.'

Florida (8-5, 4-4), Oklahoma (6-7, 2-6) and **Auburn (5-7, 2-6)** all enter 2025 with coaches on hot seats banking on a quarterback to turn down the heat.

The Gators won their last four games of the season after Florida athletic director Scott Stricklin gave head coach Billy Napier a vote of confidence. But it's now or never for Napier, with former five-star quarterback DJ Lagway taking the reins in 2025. Lagway went 6-1 as the starting quarterback last year and tied Chris Leak's school record for most wins by a freshman. Shoulder and lower body injuries that held him out of spring football practice are the only things pausing the hype.

Brent Venables has finished with two losing seasons in his first three years at Oklahoma. The Sooners hadn't suffered a losing year since 1998 before he took over. Oklahoma finished second-to-last in the SEC in scoring offense while flip-flopping quarterbacks. Venables thinks he found a solution in Washington State transfer John Mateer (3,965 total yards, 44 touchdowns), who enters with his offensive coordinator Ben Arbuckle. Can Mateer's dual-threat success against a majority Mountain West schedule translate into the SEC?

Three **KEY GAMES**

GEORGIA VS. TEXAS, NOVEMBER 15

A bout between the conference's premier teams led by two of the country's best coaches deep into November with, presumably, an SEC Championship Game berth on the line.

ALABAMA VS. LSU, NOVEMBER 8

Take one of the sport's best rivalries and add in two opposing coaches in the midst of the most important season of their respective tenures. That's intense.

OKLAHOMA VS. AUBURN, SEPTEMBER 20

How's this for a conference opener? Jackson Arnold, the quarterback OU ran out of town, returns to Norman seeking revenge. The vibes sink for whichever team loses.

The quarterback Oklahoma let walk is hoping for a fresh start at Auburn. Jackson Arnold aims to reach his five-star ceiling by throwing to two dynamic receivers in sophomore Cam Coleman and Georgia Tech transfer Eric Singleton Jr. If he can, he'll save Hugh Freeze. Freeze has two losing seasons in his first two years, and no Auburn coach has ever stuck around after a third.

Speaking of quarterbacks, Diego Pavia is back for **Vanderbilt (7-6, 3-5)** after getting the easiest win in sports — a successful lawsuit against the NCAA. Pavia, who'll be 24 this fall, argued junior college seasons shouldn't count toward eligibility. He'll attempt to lead the Commodores to back-to-back bowl wins for the second time in program history (2012-13).

Sam Pittman at **Arkansas (7-6, 3-5)** and Mark Stoops at **Kentucky (4-8, 1-7)** have done admirable jobs turning around moribund programs but must prove they haven't already reached their respective ceilings.

Mississippi State's (2-10, 0-8) Jeff Leiby has a long rebuild ahead after winning one FBS game against UMass in his first season. Former Baylor quarterback Blake Shapen has weapons in Georgia transfer Anthony Evans III (Converse Judson) and Ole Miss transfer Ayden Williams.

5 PLAYERS TO KNOW

QB GARRETT NUSSMEIER, LSU
Nussmeier opted for a fifth season at LSU instead of the NFL Draft and is a Heisman Trophy frontrunner. But the hardware that matters to him? A National Championship.

QB DJ LAGWAY, FLORIDA
The 2024 Mr. Texas Football winner had a freshman All-American season. He's considered one of the nation's best returning starters, if the spring injuries heal.

QB JOHN MATEER, OKLAHOMA
The former three-star prep recruit, got the five-star transfer treatment. He's tasked to inject life into the Sooners' offense, and Brent Venables' tenure, with his moxie.

CB JERMOD MCCOY, TENNESSEE
McCoyle tied for an SEC-leading four interceptions and ranked second in the conference with 13 passes defended (the most at Tennessee since 2021). He was a Thorpe Award semifinalist.

OG JAEDEN ROBERTS, ALABAMA
The rising fifth-year senior started all season at right guard and was placed on both the Lombardi Award and Outland Trophy (best interior lineman) watch lists.



Garrett NUSSMEIER
The leading returning passer in the SEC, the Flower Mound Marcus product is ready to lead LSU back to the national title stage.

DC
TX

David Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
SEC

Photo Credit: Rodney Wooders

**BY MIKE CRAVEN****SARKISIAN'S HORNS EYE TITLE
AFTER BACK-TO-BACK CFP RUNS**

Steve Sarkisian was hired by Texas to return the Longhorns to national prominence. The Longhorns hadn't won a conference championship since 2009 and had posted only one 10-win season since Colt McCoy was injured in the Rose Bowl against Alabama that same year.

He's done exactly that, leading the Horns to 25 wins, two conference championship games in two separate conferences, and consecutive appearances in the College Football Playoff semifinals.

But that's not enough. Sark knows it. So do the players on the roster. At Texas, the standards are measured by championships — something this program hasn't achieved since 2005. Before that, it was 1970. Texas is trending in the right direction, however, and the team enters 2025 as one of the betting favorites to win the second iteration of the 12-team CFP.

"My goal is to retire here. I'm 51 today, and I hope I can coach a long, long time," Sarkisian said in the spring. "But the only way to do that is to have continued success, because here the standard is the standard. You either compete and win championships or you don't. There's not a lot of gray area."

The Texas brand never lost its luster. It was the on-field product that lost its shine.

Beyond the wins and losses, it was the NFL Draft that best illustrated the Longhorns' fall from grace. Only one Longhorn was drafted in 2016 and 2017. No more than four were picked between 2018 and 2020. The last first-round draft pick from the Forty Acres before Sark's arrival was Malcom Brown in 2015 — and he was the last pick of the round.

Just like the on-field results, the tide has turned in Austin. Five players, including Bijan Robinson with the eighth overall pick, were drafted in 2023. Over the last two seasons, no team in the country has produced more NFL draft picks than the 23 developed by Texas. The 12 picks in the recent 2025 draft set a school record for the most in a seven-round draft.

"That says a lot about the work these guys have poured into building our program and the trajectory of where we're headed because of these guys," Sarkisian said of the run of NFL draft picks over the last two seasons. "This group of guys went to back-to-back College Football Playoff semifinals, led us to top-five rankings the last two years, won the Big 12, and were in the SEC Championship game in overtime — things that hadn't been done at Texas for a long time."

A new herd of Horns must lead Texas over the next hurdle. The Longhorns ranked 103rd nationally in returning production entering the spring, with only 45 percent returning. Offensively, Texas returns just 29 percent of its production from last year, which ranks 126th in the FBS. The defense checked in at 44th nationally, returning 61 percent of its production from 2024.

A change of the guard doesn't represent a rebuilding year for the Longhorns, however — quite the opposite. The Arch Manning era begins on the Forty Acres this fall, and the first game of the season is a trip to Ohio State to face the defending national champion Buckeyes, the team that ended Texas' 2024 season. Sarkisian & Co. have signed four straight top-five recruiting classes and have one of the best staffs in the country at using the transfer portal to address need positions.

"When I got here, I didn't want to be a one-hit wonder," Sarkisian said. "I didn't want to live in the portal — one year we're good and the next year we're not. I want to win a national championship. There's no question about it. But the fact that we went from 5-7 to 8-5 to the semifinals two years in a row speaks to the consistency of our program and the foundation we've built."

Steve Sarkisian's Longhorns try to reach the College Football Playoff for the third year in a row after consecutive losses in the semifinal round. Texas must replace Quinn Ewers, four starters on the offensive line and a pair of key defensive tackles in Alfred Collins and Vernon Broughton.

Sarkisian has put together one of the deepest and most talented rosters in America, however. The return of C.J. Baxter at running back and defensive stars such as linebacker Anthony Hill, Michael Taaffe, and Colin Simmons give the Horns a chance at the SEC title. Arch Madness will dominate the headlines.

**Arch MANNING**

After seeing limited time as Quinn Ewers' backup in 2024, the highly touted prospect is the undisputed QB1 for the Longhorns in 2025.

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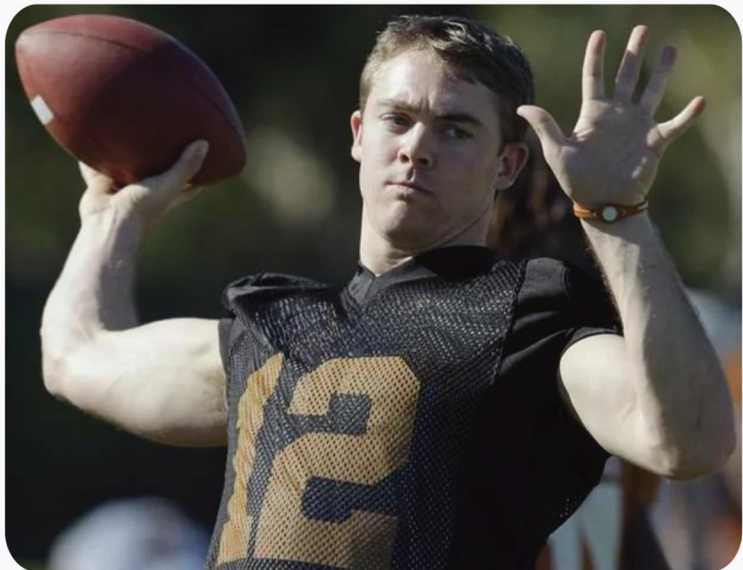


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THE OFFENSE

The Arch Manning era begins on the Forty Acres as the highly touted sophomore takes over as the face of the Texas offense. He appeared in nine games and went 2-0 as a starter, with wins over ULM and Mississippi State. Manning completed 61 of 90 passes for 939 yards and nine touchdowns to just two interceptions. He also added 108 rushing yards and four touchdowns.

"I think there's something that's unique about Arch," Sarkisian said in the spring. "When you watch him throw, the arm talent and deep ball are there. Then you watch him move and you're like, wait, this guy's a better athlete than I thought. He definitely got grandpa's genes — not the uncles', grandpa's."

Manning won't be the only new face Texas needs to step up in 2025. The Longhorns return only 29% of their offensive production, ranking 126th of 136 FBS teams. The unit loses its top two receivers — tight end Gunnar Helm and wideout Matthew Golden — as well as Isaiah Bond and Silas Bolden. Four starters from last year's offensive line are also gone, including All-American left tackle Kelvin Banks and longtime center Jake Majors.

Sarkisian is betting on development over the portal. Not a single player in the projected two-deep exiting spring was added through transfers. Texas believes wideouts DeAndre Moore and Ryan Wingo can lead the receiver room. Redshirt freshman Parker Livingstone earned rave reviews this spring, and freshmen Kaliq Lockett and Jaime Ffrench bring high-end talent.

Texas added Cal transfer tight end Jack Endries after spring ball. He caught 56 passes for 623 yards and two scores last year and will help replace Helm. Young prospects like Jordan Washington, Spencer Shannon, and Emaree Winston round out the tight end room.

Right guard DJ Campbell is the lone returning starter on the line. Trevor Goosby is expected to take over at left tackle after flashing late last year. Sophomore Brandon Baker slots in at right tackle, with senior Cole Hutson at center and Neto Umeozulu at left guard.

"The emergence of some new faces is going to be good," Sarkisian said of the offensive line. "These guys were all high-level recruits. Now it's their time, and that's okay."

The deepest, most proven unit is at running back. The only loss was Jaydon Blue. Tre Wisner emerged as the top back late last year, extending Sark's streak of 1,000-yard rushers. A healthy C.J. Baxter returns after missing 2024 with an injury. Sophomore Jerriek Gibson and redshirt freshman Christian Clark will also contribute.

BY THE

NUMBERS

33 – Points per game scored by the Longhorns, which ranked 29th in the FBS last season. That was down 2.8 points from 2023 when Texas was 15th.

37 – That's the number of sacks allowed by Texas last season, which was 118th in the country. No team allowed more tackles for loss than the Longhorns' 114.

63.77 – The touchdown percentage for the Texas offense when it reached the red zone in 2024, which was up from 50.82 percent in 2023.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Texas struggled to convert red-zone trips into touchdowns consistently over the last two years. The Horns ranked 54th nationally last year in red-zone touchdown percentage at 63.77%, which was an improvement from 2023 when they were 120th in the FBS ranks with a touchdown on just over half of their red-zone trips. The return of running back C.J. Baxter and Arch Manning at quarterback should provide Texas with more bulk in the backfield to excel in those situations. Baxter weighs over 230 pounds and Manning is listed at 6-foot-4, 222 pounds.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

RB JERRICK GIBSON

Gibson was third on the team in rushing attempts, yards, and touchdowns in his true freshman season while averaging 4.8 yards per carry. He'll fight for scraps behind the returning C.J. Baxter, who missed last season due to an injury, and Tre Wisner, who eclipsed 1,000 yards on the ground in a breakout campaign.

WR EMMETT MOSLEY V

Mosley was a transfer portal addition in the spring window who caught 48 passes for 525 yards and six touchdowns as a true freshman at Stanford. He recorded 13 catches for 168 yards and three scores in a win over Louisville on Nov. 16. He was listed at 6-foot-2, 205 pounds.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#16 Arch
QB Manning

6-4, 225, SO.
NEW ORLEANS, LA.

#4 C.J.
RB Baxter

6-1, 230, SO.
ORLANDO, FLA.

#1 Ryan
WR Wingo

6-2, 210, SO.
ST. LOUIS, MO.

#0 DeAndre
WR Moore Jr.

6-0, 195, JR.
ANAHEIM, CALIF.

#13 Parker
WR Livingstone

6-4, 195, R-FR.
LUCAS LOVEJOY

#X Jack
TE Endries

6-4, 240, JR.
DANVILLE, CALIF.

#74 Trevor
LT Goosby

6-7, 315, SO.
MELISSA

#72 Neto
LG Umeozulu

6-4, 330, JR.
ALLEN

#54 Cole
C Hutson

6-5, 310, SR.
FRISCO

#52 DJ
RG Campbell

6-3, 330, SR.
ARLINGTON BOWIE

#73 Brandon
RT Baker

6-4, 315, SO.
ONTARIO, CALIF.

Mason
K Shipley

6-0, 185, SR.
LIBERTY HILL

THE DEFENSE

Texas must replace a pair of elite defensive tackles for the third straight year. The Horns lost T’Vondre Sweat and Byron Murphy after 2023, and Keondre Coburn and Moro Ojomo the year before. Now, it’s Alfred Collins and Vernon Broughton off to the NFL after long, productive careers on the Forty Acres.

Defensive coordinator Pete Kwiatkowski weathered past departures, and head coach Steve Sarkisian believes the 2025 unit will again be among the SEC’s best. Last year’s group ranked third nationally in scoring defense, 13th in rushing defense, and seventh in passing defense.

“We have some real players on defense,” Sarkisian said in the spring. “Arch won’t have to feel like we need to outscore everyone. It won’t feel like the weight of the world if we don’t score 40.”

Texas returns a trio of game-wreckers at defensive end in Colin Simmons, Trey Moore, and Ethan Burke. Simmons won the Shaun Alexander Freshman of the Year Award after leading the team with nine sacks — third-most by a Texas freshman — and 14 tackles for loss. Moore adjusted quickly after transferring from UTSA, tallying 10.5 TFLs and 6.5 sacks in 15 games.

The linebacker corps is led by junior Anthony Hill Jr., who enters his third year as arguably the nation’s top linebacker and Texas’ best defender. The Denton Ryan product has started 22 career games and led Texas with 107 tackles and 16 TFLs in 2024. Liona Lefau and transfer Brad Spence add depth.

“One thing Anthony has proven is his playmaking—sacks, forced fumbles, picks, big hits,” Sarkisian said. “This spring, I’ve admired his consistency: being where he’s supposed to be, when he’s supposed to be there.”

The secondary may be the defense’s biggest strength, even after losing Thorpe Award winner Jahdae Barron. Junior Malik Muhammad returns as a starting corner, and sophomore Kobe Black is expected to start opposite him. Nickel Jaylon Guilbeau could shift to corner in his senior season.

The safety group is stacked. Jelani McDonald may take over at Star, Texas’ nickel spot, after playing in 23 games the past two seasons. Michael Taaffe is back at free safety after posting 78 tackles, 5.5 TFLs, two sacks, and two picks—including one vs. Texas A&M. Jordon Johnson-Rubell started at boundary safety in spring ball, with Derek Williams Jr. expected back from injury this summer. He also intercepted two passes, including one against Texas A&M. Jordon Johnson-Rubell was the starter at boundary safety in the spring with Derek Williams Jr., expected back from injury over the summer.

BY THE

NUMBERS

15.3 – Texas ranked third nationally in scoring defense trailing only national champion Ohio State and Ole Miss while allowing 15.3 points per game. The Horns allowed 18.9 in 2023.

2.88 – The number of sacks for Texas per game last year, which ranked 15th in the FBS. The Horns racked up 46 total sacks – fourth most in the country.

22 – Texas was tied for the national lead with BYU in interceptions last year. Jahdae Barron and Andrew Mukuba accounted for 10 of those.

KEEP AN EYE ON

The Longhorns signed five defensive tackles who each weigh over 300 pounds over the two transfer portal windows to help offset the losses of Alfred Collins and Vernon Broughton. Cole Brevard (Purdue), Travis Shaw (North Carolina), and Hero Kanu (Ohio State) enrolled in the winter and participated in spring practices. The Horns dipped back into the portal during the spring window for Maraad Watson (Syracuse) and Lavon Johnson (Maryland). Texas has sent six defensive tackles to the NFL over the last three seasons. The only other transfer portal addition on the defensive side of the ball was Arkansas linebacker Brad Spence.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

LB TY’ANTHONY SMITH

The Jasper product played in all 16 games as a true freshman in 2024, mostly on special teams. The 6-1, 220-pound middle linebacker is the heir apparent to Anthony Hill and showed flashes of all-conference potential in extended time against UTSA and Florida, recording nine of his 16 tackles in those two games.

DB XAVIER FILSAIME

A McKinney export who ranked seventh overall in-state during a 2024 cycle that included Colin Simmons, Terry Bussey, and DJ Lagway. Filsaime competed in seven games last year, including the Peach Bowl win over Arizona State and the Cotton Bowl loss to Ohio State. He’ll benefit from Duane Akina’s return.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#1 Colin
DE Simmons

6-3, 245, SO.
DUNCANVILLE

#99 Cole
NT Brevard

6-3, 333, SR.
CARMEL, IND.

#44 Travis
DT Shaw

6-5, 330, SR.
GREENSBORO, N.C.

#8 Trey
BCK Moore

6-3, 245, SR.
SMITHSON VALLEY

#0 Anthony
MLB Hill

6-3, 235, JR.
DENTON RYAN

#18 Liona
WLB Lefau

6-1, 225, JR.
LAIE, HAWAII

#25 Jelani
NB McDonald

6-2, 205, JR.
WACO CONNALLY

#5 Malik
CB Muhammad

6-0, 190, JR.
SOUTH OAK CLIFF

#6 Kobe
CB Black

6-2, 200, SO.
WACO CONNALLY

#16 Michael
FS Taaffe

6-0, 195, SR.
WESTLAKE

#2 Derek
BS Williams

6-2, 195, SO.
NEW IBERIA, LA.

#19 Jack
P Bouwmeester

6-3, 197, SR.
BENDIGO, AUSTRALIA

DC
TX

TEXAS FOOTBALL
Dave Campbell's

COLLEGE
TEXAS LONGHORNS

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

"They're talented and well coached. To me, they've built the team in a way that's required to be successful in college football. They've started up front on both sides of the football and that's what Texas lacked for a long time. Amazing what hiring a competent coach at a place with unlimited resources can do, huh? You could see it coming if Sarkisian stayed on the straight and narrow."

"Does Texas have the same type of guys that they had the last two years? You think about the number of not just draft picks but first-, second-round draft picks. Are they reloading enough to do that? And then, is Arch what everybody thinks he is? They've lost high draft picks at almost every position on the team the last two years and Arch might not have the talent around him that Quinn had. And those defensive tackles? That's not easy to replace."

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Photo Credit: Joe Roberts

Colin SIMMONS

Where Legends Begin

SCHEDULE & PREDICTIONS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 30	at Ohio State	L	Oct. 25	at Mississippi State	W
Sept. 6	San Jose State	W	Nov. 1	Vanderbilt	W
Sept. 13	UTEP	W	Nov. 15	at Georgia	L
Sept. 20	Sam Houston	W	Nov. 22	Arkansas	W
Oct. 4	at Florida	W	Nov. 29	Texas A&M	W
Oct. 11	Oklahoma (Dallas)	W			
Oct. 18	at Kentucky	W			

Record: 10-2 (8-1)

BIGGEST GAME — AUG. 30 AT OHIO STATE

Ohio State ended Texas' 2024 season in the Cotton Bowl during the semifinal round of the College Football Playoff. The defending champion Buckeyes will play host to the Longhorns to start the 2025 season in what should be Arch Manning's true introduction to the college football world.

TRAP GAME — OCT. 4 AT FLORIDA

The week before the Red River Rivalry against Oklahoma is historically a trap game warning for the Horns. That's especially true in 2025 when Texas heads to Florida to face super sophomore D.J. Lagway and the Gators in The Swamp seven days before the annual tilt against the Sooners in Dallas.

UPSET GAME — NOV. 15 AT GEORGIA

Texas will be favored in all but two games in the 2025 regular season. One of those underdog moments is against Ohio State in Week 1. The other? On the road against a Georgia squad that beat Texas twice in 2024, including in overtime for the SEC championship.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING: 12-0

Why can't Texas run the table if Arch Manning lives up to his last name? The Horns will be motivated to beat Ohio State and Georgia in 2025 after posting a combined 0-3 record against those two squads last year. They'll be favored in every other contest thanks to a Top 5 roster in the nation.

FLOOR: 8-4

The bottom falling out for Texas equates to three or more losses and missing the College Football Playoff for the first time in three years. Road losses at Ohio State, Georgia, and Florida are easy to envision with a first-year starter at quarterback, as is a rivalry game defeat against Oklahoma or Texas A&M.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 31	Colorado State	W, 52-0	Nov. 9	Florida	W, 49-17
Sept. 7	at Michigan	W, 31-12	Nov. 16	at Arkansas	W, 20-10
Sept. 14	UTSA	W, 56-7	Nov. 23	Kentucky	W, 31-14
Sept. 21	ULM	W, 51-3	Nov. 30	at Texas A&M	W, 17-7
Sept. 28	Mississippi State	W, 35-13	Dec. 7	Georgia (SEC Champ)	L, 22-19 (OT)
Oct. 12	Oklahoma (Dallas)	W, 34-3	Dec. 21	Clemson (CFP)	W, 38-24
Oct. 19	Georgia	L, 30-15	Jan. 1	Arizona State (CFP)	W, 39-31 (2OT)
Oct. 26	at Vanderbilt	W, 27-24	Jan. 10	Ohio State (CFP)	L, 28-14

Record: 13-3 (7-1)

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Three **GEMS****S JONAH WILLIAMS**

A two-sport standout with freak athleticism, Williams is already contributing on Texas' baseball team. On the football field, he projects as a versatile safety with elite size, speed and character. While his role may evolve, expect him to emerge as a defensive weapon capable of covering ground and delivering hits all over the field.

EDGE LANCE JACKSON

The younger brother of NFL Draft pick Landon Jackson, Lance enters Texas with similar upside—and possibly more. He's a twitchy, powerful DL who's nearly unblockable one-on-one. Jackson's bull rush and closing speed stand out on tape, and he's just scratching the surface of his frame potential. He's a future problem for SEC offenses.

WR KALIQ LOCKETT

Blends elite track speed with soft hands and body control, making him a deep-threat weapon with real upside. A consistent producer and Navy All-American Bowl alum, he thrives in contested catch situations and adjusts well mid-air. As he sharpens his route running, he has the tools to contribute early in Texas' receiver rotation.

Rickey **STEWART**the **EXPERT'S TAKE**RECRUITING
GRADE**A+****DCTF RECRUITING ANALYST GREG POWERS**

Texas has raised the recruiting bar once again under Steve Sarkisian, riding the momentum of consecutive strong seasons and an SEC move that has only heightened the program's appeal. The Longhorns capitalized on that surge by signing the No. 1 recruiting class in the country, a haul that reinforces UT's standing as a premier destination for top-tier talent. Texas is now firmly in the mix for the nation's best prospects year after year, stacking deep, well-balanced classes filled with high-level players at every position — the type of roster built to win in the SEC and contend for the College Football Playoff.

2025 RECRUITING CLASS**HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE** (247Sports Rank: 1st)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Elijah Barnes	LB	6-2	220	Dallas Skyline
Nick Brooks	OL	6-7	345	Grayson (Ga.)
Myron Charles	DL	6-4	295	Port Charlotte (Fla.)
Caleb Chester	CB	6-1	170	Fort Bend Marshall
Jackson Christian	OL	6-5	310	Port Neches-Groves
Devin Coleman	OL	6-4	340	Cedar Hill
Jordan Coleman	OL	6-5	350	Cedar Hill
Jonathan Cunningham	LB	6-2	195	North Crowley
Jaime Ffrench	WR	6-1	185	Mandarin (Fla.)
Zelus Hicks	DB	6-2	190	Carrollton (Ga.)
Lance Jackson	Edge	6-5	260	Texarkana Pleasant Grove
KJ Lacey	QB	6-0	175	Saraland (Ala.)
Graceson Littleton	DB	6-0	180	Wiregrass Ranch (Fla.)
Kaliq Lockett	WR	6-2	175	Sachse
Daylan McCutcheon	WR	5-11	175	Lovejoy
Smith Orogbo	Edge	6-4	220	Alief Hastings
Kade Phillips	DB	6-1	185	Fort Bend Hightower
Josiah Sharma	DL	6-5	325	Folsom (Calif.)
James Simon	RB	5-11	200	Calvary Baptist Academy (La.)
Rickey Stewart	RB	5-10	180	Tyler Chapel Hill
Justus Terry	DL	6-5	290	Manchester (Ga.)
Michael Terry III	ATH	6-3	215	Alamo Heights
Nick Townsend	TE	6-3	235	Spring Dekaney
Jonah Williams	S	6-3	205	Galveston Ball
Emaree Winston	TE	6-2	245	Calhoun (Ga.)

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 24th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Jack Bouwmeester	P	6-3	200	Utah
Cole Brevard	DL	6-3	335	Purdue
Matthew Caldwell	QB	6-4	212	Troy
Jack Endries	TE	6-4	240	Cal
Lavon Johnson	DL	6-2	310	Maryland
Hero Kanu	DL	6-5	305	Ohio State
Emmett Mosley V	WR	6-2	190	Stanford
Travis Shaw	DL	6-5	330	North Carolina
Mason Shipley	K	6-0	185	Texas State
Brad Spence	LB	6-2	240	Arkansas
Maraad Watson	DT	6-3	313	Syracuse

UNDER THE RADAR**OL JACKSON CHRISTIAN**

Christian brings a nasty streak to the trenches and 40+ starts of varsity experience. A mauler in the run game, he consistently dominates at the second level. With his size, athleticism, and long arms, he could start at guard or tackle down the line. Texas fans will love his physical edge and relentless finish.

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**BY MIKE CRAVEN****ELKO'S AGGIES AIM HIGHER
AFTER LAYING CULTURE GROUNDWORK**

Texas A&M regressed to the mean after a hot start in the first year of the Mike Elko era. The Aggies won seven straight, punctuated by a comeback victory over LSU under the lights at Kyle Field, following the Week 1 loss to a Notre Dame squad that wound up in the national championship game four months later. They lost the final four against Power Four opponents, including to Texas at home in the return of the rivalry.

"The reality is, we were probably somewhere in the middle, and that's where we finished," Elko said in the spring. "It sucks how we got there, to some degree, but we put ourselves in position to get on some big stages at the end, and we just didn't handle them well or play our best football. It was the first time these kids have been in a situation where they were playing in those types of meaningful games, and that requires a bit of a learning curve."

The Aggie faithful won't allow much more time for studying. They want results. That's why Texas A&M paid Jimbo Fisher the GDP of a small island to go away. The instant success of the Longhorns upon entering the SEC doesn't help. After all, college football is only as fun as it is miserable for your rivals. Elko spent Year 1 establishing a culture and putting the "team" back into Texas A&M.

Accumulating talent is a massive factor in predicting college football success. Yet, no fan base in America better understands that it requires more than five-star talent to win football games and compete for championships.

The Aggies signed the top-rated recruiting class in recorded internet history in 2022 and went 12–13 over the next two seasons before replacing Fisher with Elko. Le'Veon Moss, safety Bryce Anderson, and tight end Theo Melin Ohrstrom are the only projected starters still on campus from that historic 30-man signing class.

Football is the ultimate team sport and, cliché as it sounds, culture wins championships. The locker room matters. Accountability counts. Ask any Aggie player who was on the team before and after the change at head coach about the switch, and the most mentioned word is "culture."

"The accountability of the team was a lot different last year than it was my freshman year," quarterback Marcel Reed said. "You could see everyone was trying to do the right thing, and that brought us closer together — as well as giving us the discipline to go out there and play sound and be disciplined in what we were doing."

Eight wins was a solid foundation for Elko's Ags. Year 2 requires more. They settled on a quarterback in Marcel Reed, and he received a whole offseason

of first-team reps. The entire starting offensive line and the primary two backups return to power a rushing attack that'll feature Le'Veon Moss, Amari Daniels, and Reuben Owens. They stocked the pond with top transfers at wide receiver and tight end. And Elko believes the defense will benefit the most from a second year in the system.

"I think we have to make the natural Year 1 to Year 2 jump," Elko said. "I think that's a critical component to what has to happen around here. I don't think anybody truly appreciates how challenging it is in Year 1 to get everything up and running at the level you want it."

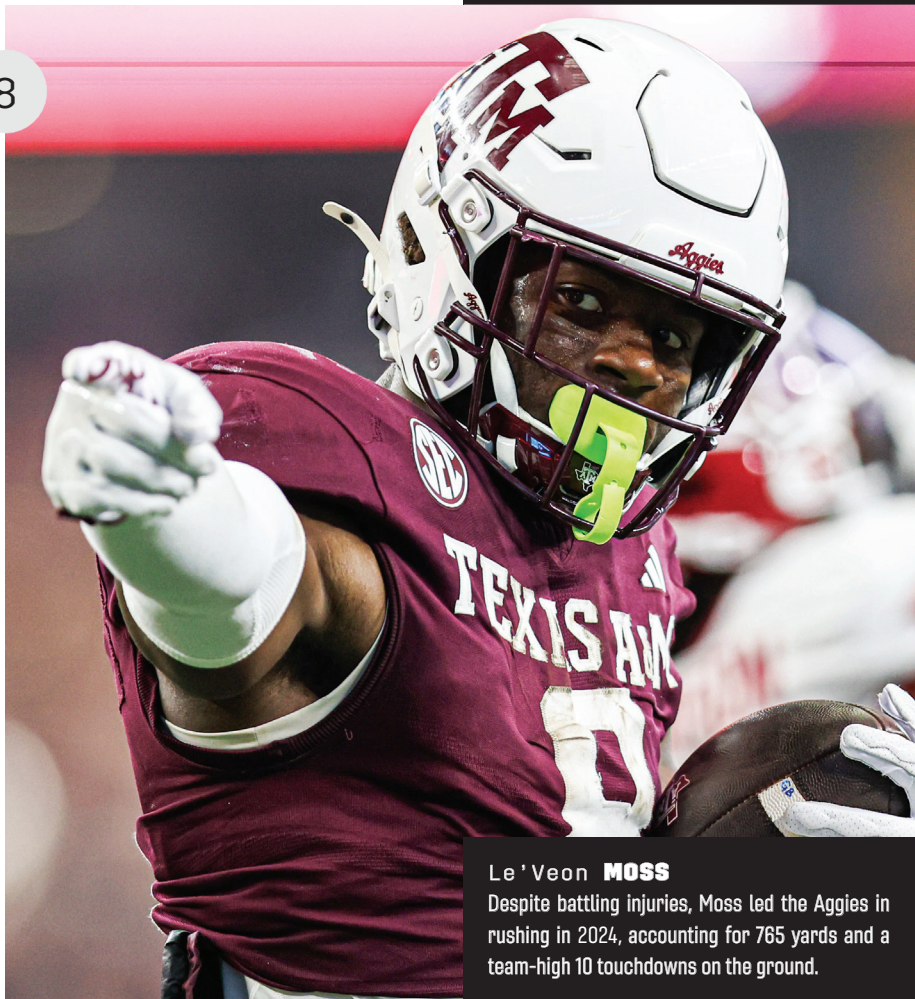
Even an improved Aggie squad could struggle to improve on last season's eight-win total. They must travel to Notre Dame, LSU, and Texas. The home slate includes Auburn, Florida, and South Carolina. The good news is that the 12-team playoff doesn't require perfection, and a 9–3 record against that gauntlet provides Texas A&M with a strong argument for one of the final playoff spots. Win 10 games, and the case is closed.

And make no mistake — those are the expectations in Aggieland moving forward.

Expect the Aggies to lean on the running game with Marcel Reed chosen as the future at quarterback. He'll be joined in the backfield by a trio of talented running backs in Le'Veon Moss, Amari Daniels, and former five-star Reuben Owens. The offensive line returns all five starters, including left tackle Trey Zuhn and right guard Armaj Reed-Adams.

The real question marks are on the defensive side of the ball for Mike Elko in Year 2. Texas A&M must replace defensive ends Shemar Stewart and Nic Scourton while improving against the pass. The 2025 schedule is tougher than it was in 2024.

8

**Le'Veon MOSS**

Despite battling injuries, Moss led the Aggies in rushing in 2024, accounting for 765 yards and a team-high 10 touchdowns on the ground.

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THE OFFENSE

Marcel Reed (1,864 passing yards, 15 TDs; 547 rushing yards, 7 TDs) emerged as Texas A&M's starting quarterback by season's end. He started eight games in 11 appearances and solidified himself as the future at the position with a second-half comeback against LSU that included three unanswered rushing touchdowns.

Reed is an undeniable runner — he led all SEC quarterbacks with 4.7 yards per rush. The Aggies need him to improve as a downfield passer, something head coach Mike Elko feels confident about thanks to Reed's growing comfort in offensive coordinator Collin Klein's system.

"I think we'll see some big growth from him," Elko said. "He was thrown into the fire, and that taught him the urgency of preparation — the urgency of really locking in on all those little details. He now knows what it takes to be a successful quarterback at this level."

To help Reed and the passing game, Texas A&M upgraded through the transfer portal at wide receiver and tight end. KC Concepcion (NC State) and Mario Craver (Mississippi State) will start at receiver alongside super sophomore Terry Bussey. Concepcion caught 124 passes for 1,299 yards and 16 touchdowns in two ACC seasons. Craver averaged 21.6 yards per reception as a true freshman. The only major loss was Noah Thomas, who transferred to Georgia.

The Aggies also added three tight ends through the portal to team with returning starter Theo Melin Ohrstrom. Amari Niblack (Texas) began his career at Alabama and is a weapon in the passing game. Nebraska transfer Nate Boerkircher is an elite run blocker.

"We had a lot of turnover in the wide receiver room. We needed to go out and build that group, and I think we did just that," Elko said. "We're really excited about the two transfers. Both of those kids are going to impact games."

The running back room is a known commodity, with the top four rushers from last year still on campus. Le'Veon Moss (765 yards, 10 TDs) was having an All-SEC season before an injury in Week 9. He'll be joined by Amari Daniels, E.J. Smith, and Reuben Owens — a former five-star who played just two games due to injury.

The offensive line is the strength of the offense, a sharp contrast from the final years of the Jimbo Fisher era. Left tackle Trey Zuhn and right guard Ar'maj Reed-Adams are all-conference-caliber. Chase Bisontis returns at left guard, as do right tackles Dametrious Crownover and Reuben Fatheree II. Koli Faaiu is back at center and will compete with Mark Nabou, who was injured in Week 1 against Notre Dame.

"Cohesion matters up front, and we have our top seven guys coming back," Elko said. "That's always a positive — especially coming from a group that played pretty good football last fall."

BY THE

NUMBERS

30.4 – The Aggies scored just over 30 points a game and checked in at 49th nationally in scoring offense in Year 1 under offensive coordinator Collin Klein.

210.3 – Texas A&M was 87th in passing yards per game as Marcel Reed and Conner Weigman split time at quarterback last year.

90.57 – That's the scoring percentage for Texas A&M in the red zone, which was 17th nationally and second in Texas, trailing only TCU. The 69.81 touchdown percentage was 29th in FBS.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Football is a violent sport and the prospect of a dual-threat quarterback is a double-edged sword. Marcel Reed's legs give the Aggies their best shot at SEC contention. It also puts him in the line of fire. Texas A&M has started multiple quarterbacks every season since the pandemic because of injury and the backup quarterback spot in Aggieland was an open battle entering the summer. Transfer Jacob Zeno added a veteran presence to a young room. Redshirt freshman Miles O'Neill and true freshman Brady Hart were highly touted recruits competing for QB2 with Zeno.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

OL MARK NABOU JR.

A former 12-game starter at left guard who successfully made the transition to starting center for the 2024 season before a season-ending injury in Week 1 against Notre Dame. He'll compete with Koli Faaiu at center and be a swing guard to help spell Chase Bisontis and Ar'maj Reed-Adams.

TE AMARI NIBLACK

The athletic tight end began his career at Alabama and will become the first football player in modern times to play for both Texas and Texas A&M. Niblack has caught 26 passes for 375 yards and five touchdowns in three seasons in the SEC.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#10 Marcel
QB Reed

6-2, 185, SO.
NASHVILLE, TENN.

#8 Le'Veon
RB Moss

6-0, 210, SR.
WALKER, LA.

#7 KC
WR Concepcion

5-11, 190, JR.
CHARLOTTE, N.C.

#2 Terry
WR Bussey

6-0, 195, SO.
TIMPSON

#1 Mario
WR Craver

5-10, 165, SO.
BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

#17 Theo Melin
TE Ohrstrom

6-6, 260, JR.
STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN

#60 Trey
LT Zuhn III

6-7, 320, SR.
FORT COLLINS, COLO.

#71 Chase
LG Bisontis

6-6, 330, JR.
RAMSEY, N.J.

#61 Kolinu'u
C Faaiu

6-3, 340, SR.
LYNWOOD, WASH.

#55 Ar'maj
RG Reed-Adams

6-5, 340, SR.
DESOTO

#78 Dametrious
RT Crownover

6-7, 340, SR.
GRANDVIEW

#47 Randy
K Bond

5-11, 200, SR.
PLANO WEST

DC
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THE DEFENSE

The Wrecking Crew allowed too many big plays in 2024, and eliminating them was a major point of emphasis this offseason, according to head coach Mike Elko. His Aggies ranked 106th in the FBS in 40-plus-yard plays allowed (16). They also gave up 29 plays of 30-plus yards and 60 of 20-plus — both ranking in the 90s out of 134 schools.

“It’s funny, because play-in and play-out, it was one of the best defenses I’ve had at Texas A&M from an efficiency standpoint,” Elko said. “But from a statistical standpoint, it was one of the worst. The problem was the amount of explosive plays we gave up.”

Elko believes experience and continuity within a system are key on defense. Broken coverages and missed assignments often cause big plays. Year 2 should produce fewer of those. The SEC’s best defenses have coordinators and schemes that have been in place for years.

“The hardest thing in Year 1 is that you can’t control the variables — you defend whatever the offense throws at you,” Elko said. “That’s where reps and experience matter. Having guys back who now have a year in the system will help us tremendously.”

The challenge is improving a unit that lost multiple NFL draft picks along the defensive line. The Aggies posted 92 tackles for loss last season, ranking in the top 25 nationally. More than 25% came from Nic Scourton, Shemar Turner, and Shemar Stewart — all now in the NFL.

To reload, the Aggies added transfer edge rushers T.J. Searcy (Florida), Dayon Hayes (Colorado), and Sam M’Pemba (Georgia), who will compete with returners Cashius Howell and Rylan Kennedy. Iowa State transfer Tyler Onyedim impressed this spring and should see significant snaps inside. Albert Regis and former five-star DJ Hicks will anchor the interior.

“That’s college football,” Elko said of losing three NFL draft picks. “We’re excited about guys like Cashius and Rylan. It’s DJ Hicks’ time to step into a big role. And then you fill gaps with the portal.”

Linebacker is a steadier unit with Taurean York and Scooby Williams returning as starters and reserve Daymion Sanford back as well. Safety also boasts continuity with Dalton Brooks, Bryce Anderson, and Marcus Ratcliffe all returning. Sophomore Myles Davis was a spring standout.

Texas A&M ranked 90th nationally in passing yards allowed last year (3,018 over 13 games) — a sharp drop from Elko’s 2021 defense, which led the country in fewest pass yards allowed per game.

Will Lee III is a proven all-conference cornerback. Dezz Ricks and Georgia transfer Julian Humphrey are battling for the other spot. Both are former national Top 100 recruits looking to tap into their potential in their second collegiate stops.

BY THE

NUMBERS

22.2 – Texas A&M allowed just over 22 points a game which was 34th in the FBS and 11th in the SEC in Year 1 of the Mike Elko era.

7.08 – That’s the average number of tackles for loss Texas A&M recorded in a game last year, good for 18th-best in FBS. The Aggies had 92 total on the year.

232.2 – Texas A&M was 90th in passing yards allowed in America at over 230 per game. The Aggies were 37th in passing defense in 2023.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Improving the pass defense was priority No. 1 for Mike Elko and the defensive staff at Texas A&M. The nickel is one of the most important positions in modern football as an answer for the multiplicity of college offenses.

Tyreek Chappell and Washington transfer Jordan Shaw are the likely candidates to become the mainstay at the spot for the Aggies in 2025. Chappell is a senior who started the first two games of 2024 before suffering a season-ending injury in practice. Shaw is a redshirt sophomore who started nine games and played in 13 during his only season at Washington.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

DT TYLER ONYEDIM

The Iowa State transfer started 21 games over the last two seasons for the Cyclones and was honorable mention All-Big 12 in 2023. He recorded 33 tackles, including 2.5 tackles for loss last season. He’ll rotate with Albert Regis and D.J. Hicks in the interior of the Aggie defensive line.

DB MYLES DAVIS

Davis made a strong impression this spring and proved worthy of more snaps in the Aggie secondary. The Converse Judson product was primarily a special teams player in his 12 appearances as a true freshman. He’ll be a primary reserve and push for starting snaps behind Bryce Anderson and Dalton Brooks.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#50 Dayon
DE Hayes

6-3, 260, SR.
PITTSBURGH, PA.

#17 Albert
NT Regis

6-2, 315, SR.
LA PORTE

#13 D.J.
DT Hicks

6-5, 310, JR.
KATY PAETOW

#18 Cashius
DE Howell

6-4, 255, SR.
KANSAS CITY, MO.

#21 Taurean
WLB York

6-0, 235, JR.
TEMPLE

#0 Scooby
MLB Williams

6-2, 230, SR.
BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

#7 Tyreek
NB Chappell

5-11, 185, SR.
PHILADELPHIA, PA.

#6 Julian
CB Humphrey

6-0, 195, JR.
CLEAR LAKE

#4 Will
CB Lee III

6-3, 190, SR.
ST. LOUIS, MO.

#25 Dalton
SS Brooks

6-0, 200, JR.
SHINER

#1 Bryce
FS Anderson

6-0, 190, SR.
BEAUMONT WEST BROOK

#37 Tyler
P White

6-4, 220, SO.
SOUTHLAKE CARROLL

DTX

Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
TEXAS A&M AGGIES

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

"Elko came in and kind of steadied the A&M ship. It'll be interesting to see what they do this year because from the outside looking in and being a Texan, I know those guys down there in College Station are going to get frustrated if it stays the status quo. I know last year was a great year, but more years like that won't cut it. They're going to get frustrated, especially because of what Texas is doing."

"Mike (Elko) brought in a culture that is a complete 180 from Jimbo and that's a good thing. Will he win enough for that fan base? I don't know. That's a tough conference and that job is infinitely harder when the Longhorns are cooking."

"You'd think the expanded playoff helps A&M more than anybody. Just finish fourth or fifth in that conference and you're probably in."

DC TX

Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALLCOLLEGE
TEXAS A&M AGGIES

17

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Albert REGIS

Photo Credit: Jack Gorman/Getty Images

Where Legends Begin

SCHEDULE & PREDICTIONS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 30	UTSA	W	Oct. 25	at LSU	L
Sept. 6	Utah State	W	Nov. 8	at Missouri	W
Sept. 13	at Notre Dame	L	Nov. 15	South Carolina	L
Sept. 27	Auburn	W	Nov. 22	Samford	W
Oct. 4	Mississippi State	W	Nov. 29	at Texas	L
Oct. 11	Florida	W			
Oct. 18	at Arkansas	W			

Record: 8-4 (5-3)

BIGGEST GAME — NOV. 29 AT TEXAS

Knocking off the "t-sips" for the first time since a trip to Austin in 2010 is high on the priority list for Texas A&M. Punctuating Year 2 of the Mike Elko era with a win over the Horns would be priceless for on- and off-field momentum in Aggieland.

TRAP GAME — OCT. 18 AT ARKANSAS

Old Southwest Conference foes Texas A&M and Arkansas meet in Arkansas for the first time since 2013. The Aggies have won 12 of their last 13 against the Razorbacks, but the mid-October trip is sandwiched between a home game against Florida and a trip to LSU.

UPSET GAME — SEPT. 13 AT NOTRE DAME

The first of three tough road challenges for Texas A&M in 2025 is against Notre Dame in South Bend. The Fighting Irish knocked off the Aggies in College Station in last year's season opener and ended the year in the national title game.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING: 10-2

Running the table might be an impossible ask in Year 2 for Mike Elko's squad, but winning 10 games and reaching the College Football Playoff isn't off the table if Marcel Reed takes the next step and the Wrecking Crew improves against the pass. The Aggies must hold serve at home.

FLOOR: 5-7

Combine a tough SEC slate with a non-conference schedule that includes a road trip to Notre Dame and it's possible that the Aggies flirt with missing a bowl. Trips to Notre Dame, LSU, Missouri, and Texas are tough. Home games against Florida, South Carolina and Auburn aren't gimmes.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 31	Notre Dame	L, 23-13	Oct. 26	LSU	W, 38-23
Sept. 7	McNeese	W, 52-10	Nov. 2	at South Carolina	L, 44-20
Sept. 14	at Florida	W, 33-20	Nov. 16	New Mexico State	W, 38-3
Sept. 21	Bowling Green	W, 26-20	Nov. 23	at Auburn	L, 43-41 (4OT)
Sept. 28	Arkansas (Arlington)	W, 21-17	Nov. 30	Texas	L, 17-7
Oct. 5	Missouri	W, 41-10	Dec. 27	USC (Las Vegas Bowl)	L, 35-31
Oct. 19	at Mississippi State	W, 34-24			

Record: 8-5 (5-3)

RECRUITING BREAKDOWN

Three GEMS

DL DJ SANDERS

Sanders is a disruptive interior force with rare explosiveness for his size. He dominated at 4A Division II level in Texas and has the traits—quick first step, strength, and versatility — to thrive in the SEC. A mismatch creator along the defensive line, he'll be tough to keep off the field once he adjusts.

OL LAMONT ROGERS

Rogers brings prototype left tackle size and athleticism to College Station. A Navy All-American Bowl alum, his long arms and footwork make him a natural pass protector. The early returns are strong, and if he continues his development curve, he could be a future anchor on the Aggies' offensive line.

RB DEONDRAE RIDEN

Riden is a battle-tested back from DeSoto's powerhouse pipeline, blending speed with physicality. He's a downhill runner who punishes tacklers and refuses to come off the field. SEC-ready toughness and championship pedigree make him an early candidate for meaningful carries in College Station.



Deyjhon PETTAWAY

Photo Credit: Darrell Gist

the EXPERT'S TAKE

RECRUITING
GRADE

A

DCTF RECRUITING ANALYST GREG POWERS

Mike Elko's first full recruiting class at Texas A&M sets a strong foundation for a new era in College Station. Ranked among the nation's best, the 2025 haul features a mix of in-state stars and national headliners, including five-star wideout Jerome Myles from Utah. Elko emphasized more than just talent — he targeted high-character players who bring leadership and stability to a locker room that's seen its share of turnover. The new blueprint revolves around continuity, development and fit.

2025 RECRUITING CLASS

HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE (247Sports Rank: 10th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Kiotti Armstrong	TE	6-5	265	Jasper
Jamar Beal Goines	DB	6-0	170	Desert Edge (Ariz.)
Adonyss Currie	DB	6-1	170	Quartz Hill (Calif.)
Marcus Garcia	OL	6-5	270	Denton Ryan
Brady Hart	QB	6-4	180	Cocoa (Fla.)
Kelshaun Johnson	WR	5-11	160	Hitchcock
Rashad Johnson	DB	6-2	200	South Sumter (Fla.)
Marco Jones	Edge	6-5	245	San Ramon Valley (Calif.)
Nelson McGuire	OL	6-4	320	Midlothian
Noah Mikhail	LB	6-3	225	Bonita (Calif.)
Eli Morcos	QB	6-2	200	Montgomery Lake Creek
Jamarion Morrow	ATH	5-9	180	Melrose (Tenn.)
Joshua Moses	OL	6-3	315	Legacy School of Sport Sciences
Jerome Myles	WR	6-3	215	Corner Canyon (Utah)
Jonte Newman	OL	6-4	275	Cypress Bridgeland
Tristan Norman	WR	6-0	165	Montgomery Carver (Ala.)
Deyjhon Pettaway	DB	5-10	175	Katy Paetow
Deondrae Riden	RB	5-10	195	DeSoto
Kelvion Riggins	LB	6-0	205	Forney
Landon Rink	DL	6-2	280	Cy-Fair
Lamont Rogers	OL	6-6	325	Mesquite Horn
DJ Sanders	DL	6-4	290	Bellville
Cobey Sellers	CB	6-0	175	Shadow Creek
Chace Sims	DL	6-3	280	Richmond Randle
Tyler Thomas	OL	6-5	315	Dickinson

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 11th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Nate Boerkircher	TE	6-5	250	Nebraska
KC Concepcion	WR	5-11	190	NC State
Mario Craver	WR	5-10	170	Mississippi State
Dayon Hayes	Edge	6-3	265	Colorado
Julian Humphrey	CB	6-1	195	Georgia
Sam M'Pemba	Edge	6-3	250	Georgia
Amari Niblack	TE	6-4	245	Texas
Tyler Onyedim	DL	6-4	295	Iowa State
Micah Riley	TE	6-5	265	Auburn
T.J. Searcy	Edge	6-5	260	Florida
Jordan Shaw	CB	6-1	175	Washington
Jonah Wilson	WR	6-2	200	Houston
Jacob Zeno	QB	6-4	210	UAB

UNDER THE RADAR

LONDON RINK

Rink is a technically-sound defensive lineman with the motor and strength to contribute across the front. A state powerlifter and son of a former Longhorn, he brings both physical maturity and football IQ. His versatility along the front gives A&M a blue-collar disruptor with high-upside starter potential.

DCTX

David Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
TEXAS A&M AGGIES

Big 12 CONFERENCE

BY CARTER YATES

PARITY RULES IN WILD,
UNPREDICTABLE BIG 12 TITLE RACE

When Ralph Waldo Emerson said life is about the journey and not the destination, he might as well have been talking about Big 12 football.

Sure, the Big 12 ranked lowest of all Power Four conferences by placing only one team (Arizona State) in the College Football Playoff. But that was because it had the single-most thrilling conference championship race.

Nine teams were technically alive for the Big 12 Championship Game entering the final week of the regular season (four teams had 6-2 conference records, while five had 5-3 records). Ultimately, the Sun Devils prevailed, cementing their run from preseason last-place pick to champion.

Arizona State was the starkest example of the Big 12's parity, but not an outlier. Three of the conference's past four champions (Baylor in 2021, Kansas State in 2022 and ASU in 2024) began the season ranked fifth place or lower in the preseason media poll.

Don't take that as an excuse to not read our rankings — it's just a warning to buckle up and enjoy the ride.

Media members won't make the same mistake of picking **Arizona State (11-3, 7-2)** last again. The Sun Devils won the Big 12 Championship and took Texas to overtime in the College Football Playoff as a double-digit underdog. In fact, the Cinderella team might've still been dancing had the refs called a targeting foul on Texas safety Michael Taaffe with 68 seconds remaining in the fourth quarter.

Coach Kenny Dillingham's squad returns the second-most production nationally, making them favorites to repeat in 2025. Quarterback Sam Leavitt earned Offensive Freshman of the Year after throwing for three touchdowns in five of his last seven games. He'll have his favorite target, Jordyn Tyson (1,101 yards, 10 touchdowns), back healthy after an injury cost him the postseason. First-Team All-Big 12 safety Xavion Alford allowed just seven receptions all year despite playing the fourth-most coverage snaps in the conference.

While ASU was the conference's biggest surprise, **BYU (11-2, 7-2)** finishing just outside the College Football Playoff after ranking 13th in the preseason media poll would've been the top story any other year. The Cougars' No. 1-ranked scoring defense (19.6 points per game) should be salty again with linebacker Isaiah Glasker, who led the Big 12 with 15 tackles for loss.

Kansas State (9-4, 5-4) is one of the few constants in a league as unpredictable as the Big 12. The Wildcats believe they have a budding star

in junior quarterback Avery Johnson, who set the school record with 25 passing touchdowns in his first year starting. But the consistent Kansas State needs more consistency from its signal caller. In their four losses, Johnson threw four touchdowns to six interceptions while the offense averaged 15.75 points per game. In the nine wins? A 21:4 TD/INT ratio and 37.55 points per game.

Texas Tech (8-5, 6-3) and **Baylor (8-5, 6-3)** are the Lone Star State's best bet for a Big 12 Championship.

Texas Tech has pushed all its chips in. The Red Raiders spent roughly \$10 million on a transfer portal class to fix the Big 12's last-ranked passing defense and opened a \$242 million practice facility — the most investment of any in-conference foe. It's up to Coach Joey McGuire to ensure it pays off.

Baylor's 59-35 win over Texas Tech kick-started a six-game win streak that saved Dave Aranda's job. Quarterback Sawyer Robertson was a revelation off the bench and is back at the helm with 1,000-yard rusher Bryson Washington

and top receiver Josh Cameron. The hope is that continuity on offense, combined with a second year of Aranda calling defensive plays, will get Baylor off to a quicker start.

Speaking of fast starts, **Iowa State (11-3, 7-2)** kicks off the college football season on Week Zero in Ireland with a marquee matchup against Kansas State. Cyclones fans get an early indication of whether their team is ready to match last year's 11 wins, the best season in program history. Quarterback Rocco Becht is one of the conference's most experienced quarterbacks, but he'll need to find replacements for two departing 1,000-yard wide receivers. Defensive tackle Domonique Orange is the spark plug of coordinator Jon Heacock's scheme.

Kansas (5-7, 4-5) was the agent of chaos in the Big 12 Championship race. After a 1-5 start, the Jayhawks beat three ranked teams in a row (Iowa State, BYU, Colorado) in November, spoiling the conference's chance for two bids into the College Football Playoff. Quarterback



Xavion **ALFORD**

The former Alvin Shadow Creek star turned into one of the most dangerous defensive backs in the conference, guiding Arizona State to the Playoff.

Photo Credit: ASU Athletics

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TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
BIG 12



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please visit www.arlington.org

Photo: Russell Wilburn

Big 12 CONFERENCE

Jalon Daniels returned to his preseason Big 12 Offensive Player of the Year form in the back half of the season and should feel comfortable behind an offensive line that allowed the fewest sacks in the conference.

It's a new chapter for **Colorado (9-4, 7-2)**. No. 2 and No. 12 aren't walking through that door; those jerseys hang in the rafters. But coach Deion Sanders said on the "Move the Sticks" podcast that even though they won't have two players like Heisman Trophy winner Travis Hunter and Shedeur Sanders, Colorado will be better in 2025. It starts on defense with UTSA transfer linebacker Martavius French, who was one of the best defenders in the American Athletic Conference last year.

Now that Sanders turned pro, **TCU's (9-4, 6-3)** Josh Hoover is the returning leading passer. He set the program's single-season record with 3,949 yards, but TCU hopes for a more balanced approach in 2025. Hoover and veteran defensive back Bud Clark headline a roster that coach Sonny Dykes says is the most talented he's ever had. That group must survive a challenging non-conference schedule that includes UNC coach Bill Belichick's first college football game and the final Iron Skillet against SMU.

The 2024 season shook the remarkably stable programs built by Mike Gundy at **Oklahoma State (3-9, 0-9)** and Kyle Whittingham at **Utah (5-7, 2-7)** to their core.

After his second losing season in 20 years, Gundy was forced to divert some of his contract money to upcoming athlete revenue share. He also had to commit to fundraising activities to keep his job. Questions swirl in Stillwater on whether he's the man to lead the Cowboys into college football's next era.

Whittingham, the longest-tenured coach in the Big 12, named defensive coordinator Morgan Scalley head coach-in-waiting once his contract expires in 2027. The Utes haven't won a bowl game since 2017.

Sometimes, you've got to go back to move forward. Just ask **West Virginia (6-7, 5-4)** and **UCF (4-8, 2-7)**, who re-hired their most successful coaches in program history. Rich Rodriguez led West Virginia to three straight 10-win seasons in 2005-07. Since former coach Neal Brown's firing, over 50 players have entered the portal. Scott Frost is back at UCF after coaching the program to national prominence with its first perfect season in 2017.

Not all four-win debut seasons for a head coach are made the same. Take **Houston (4-8, 3-6)** and **Arizona (4-8, 2-7)**, for example. Brent Brennan's Arizona squad fell far short of dark horse Big 12 Championship expectations. Meanwhile, Willie Fritz's Houston project was supposed to be a

rebuild. Fritz and Co. brought in Texas A&M transfer quarterback Conner Weigman to improve an offense that ranked second-to-last nationally with 14 points per game.

Coach Scott Satterfield improved from three to five wins in his second year at **Cincinnati (5-7, 3-6)**. The Godfather Dontay Corleone is a three-time all-conference pick at defensive tackle, while Brendan Sorsby was the only FBS quarterback to record a 425-yard passing game and 125-yard rushing game.

Three KEY GAMES

AUGUST 23 (IRELAND): KANSAS STATE VS. IOWA STATE

This Week Zero game will have conference championship ramifications in December. Both teams must overcome first-game jitters in a foreign country to get the dub in Dublin.

SEPTEMBER 20: BAYLOR VS. ARIZONA STATE

Arizona State appears a sure contender, while Baylor could go either way based on how a daunting opening slate against Auburn, SMU and Arizona State turns out.

NOVEMBER 8: TEXAS TECH VS. BYU

After an 11-2 season, BYU isn't surprising anyone this year. The Red Raiders have to get through them for their all-in Big 12 Championship strategy to work.

5 PLAYERS TO KNOW

ARIZONA STATE WR JORDYN TYSON (ALLEN)

Tyson was one of seven Big 12 wide receivers to finish the season with over 1,000 yards despite missing the conference championship and CFP game with an injury.

ARIZONA STATE S XAVION ALFORD (SHADOW CREEK)

The 100-Yard Landlord found a permanent home in Tempe last season after bouncing from USC and Texas. He's one of the Big 12's best returning DBs.

KANSAS C BRYCE FOSTER (KATY TAYLOR)

The Mountain reached a new peak of his career, earning Second-Team All-Big 12 honors while helping block for 211.4 rushing yards per game.

ARIZONA RB ISMAIL MAHDI (PLANO EAST)

Mahdi was a two-time First-Team All-Sun Belt running back at Texas State, rushing for 2,322 yards in two years. He should start in 2025.

COLORADO CB DJ MCKINNEY (COLLEYVILLE HERITAGE)

The rangy, 6'2" corner led the Buffaloes in defensive snaps. McKinney had 62 total tackles, nine pass breakups and three interceptions. He was honorable mention all conference.



Bryce FOSTER

The former top prospect is flourishing at Kansas, earning second-team all-conference honors and buoying a Jayhawks resurgence.

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Photo Credit: KU Athletics

Where Legends Begin

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BY MIKE CRAVEN**ARANDA'S BEARS WEATHER STORM,
RISE AS BIG 12 CONTENDERS**

Ask any rancher or farmer in the Cen-Tex area surrounding Waco for their favorite fable, and the one about the cow and the buffalo is sure to be told.

The abbreviated version, for the uninitiated, is that both cows and buffalo can sense when a storm is approaching — but their reactions are opposites. The cows turn tail and run from the storm, prolonging their exposure. The buffalo run directly into the storm, minimizing the hardship. The moral: face problems head-on. When discomfort knocks, lean into it.

Baylor head coach Dave Aranda spent the first few years of his tenure running from storms. He avoided the transfer portal heading into 2022, resulting in a 6–7 season. He shied away from utilizing NIL heading into 2023, and the Bears finished 3–9. Aranda — always self-reflective and willing to change — transformed into a buffalo as his grip on the Baylor job began to slip. The Bears began to profit through the portal with players like Keaton Thomas, and even posted social media photos of assistant coaches wearing “We Pay Players” shirts at practice.

Aranda became comfortable being uncomfortable. He openly worries about the current state of college football and the uncertain future of college athletics. But he also knows he can be an agent for the good that remains — even if he's out of a job. Toward the end of the 2023 season, Aranda made a choice: he'd hire a new offensive coordinator, one with head coaching experience, so he could return to calling defensive plays — the skill that landed him the Baylor job in the first place.

“I was too worried about individual growth or individual journeys. I was too involved with people's stories,” Aranda said. “I was doing too much non-football-related stuff and not enough football at the same time. I tried to go back to the football coach I was as an assistant or a coordinator, and I think that helped us become a better football team.”

He entered the 2024 season on the hottest seat in college football. Baylor had won a program-record 12 games and a Big 12 title in 2021 — his second season in charge. The Bears were a combined 9–16 overall and 6–12 in the Big 12 over the next two years. Aranda's seat only warmed following three straight conference losses to start 2024.

The Utah game didn't count in the Big 12 standings, but it still dropped the Bears to 6–15 against Big 12 opponents since the start of 2022.

A 43–21 loss to Iowa State on Oct. 5 felt like the last straw — an inescapable storm. One not even a buffalo, much less a Bear, could outrun.

A 2–4 Baylor squad rolled into Lubbock two weeks after that loss to Iowa State with no lives left. A loss could've ended the Aranda era. Instead, his Bears crushed Texas Tech 59–35 to start a six-game winning streak that not only saved his job, but changed the outlook for the entire program. Baylor entered last year with a lame-duck head coach. It enters this year as one of the Big 12 favorites.

Aranda's Bears return their starting quarterback, top two running backs, top receiver, and four offensive line starters. Defensively, Thomas returns to lead a group once again bolstered through the portal.

“We showed a lot of grit, a lot of maturity in the second half of last season, and that made me really proud,” Aranda said. “As coaches, we try to act like the outside noise and negativity doesn't bleed into the locker room—but it does. That's human nature. Our guys could've bought into that negativity and believed it. Instead, we believed in our truth: that we're good enough, that we can win games, and that we can execute in the biggest moments.”

Dave Aranda entered the 2024 season on the hottest seat in Texas. He enters 2025 with a conference championship contender. That's how fast fortunes can change in a rowdy and wild Big 12. Baylor returns quarterback Sawyer Robertson, running back Bryson Washington, leading receiver Josh Cameron, and four starters along the offensive line.

Aranda will continue calling plays defensively for a unit that must find a pass rush in 2025. Eleven of the 19 transfers added by the Bears in the offseason are on defense, with most of them expected to contribute along the defensive line or in the secondary.

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**Josh CAMERON**

The Bears' leading receiver from 2024 returns to anchor what should be a resurgent pass-catching corps in Waco.




 COLLEGE
BAYLOR BEARS



Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

40 UNDER 40

MATT POWLEDGE - DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR/SAFETIES





THE OFFENSE

Baylor turned the keys to the offense over to Jake Spavital heading into 2024, and it paid dividends. The Bears improved from the 101st scoring offense in 2023 — averaging 23.1 points per game — to the 19th-best last year, averaging 34.4.

“He makes life hard on defensive coordinators,” Baylor head coach Dave Aranda said. “He works hard and he’s well-prepared. His offense is essentially all the plays defensive coordinators hate to scheme against. The offense saved us at times last year.”

The offense could be even better in 2025, buoyed by the return of quarterback Sawyer Robertson (3,071 yards, 28 TDs, 8 INTs). Robertson began last year as the backup to Dequan Finn but quickly took over. He threw for three touchdowns in six of the team’s final nine games. Baylor added Auburn transfer Walker White to compete with redshirt freshman Nate Bennett and true freshman Edward Griffin.

Baylor returns leading receiver Josh Cameron (52 catches, 754 yards, 10 TDs). Cameron is a former walk-on from Cedar Park whose only offer out of high school was to Trinity in Division III. He’s also one of the best returners in the Big 12. News broke after spring ball that Ashtyn Hawkins was not granted an extra year of eligibility and that prompted the Bears to add San Diego State transfer Louis Brown IV in the second window.

“We’re excited about our passing game,” Spavital said. “Josh (Cameron) is a proven receiver who did well in this system last year and we think we did a good job in the transfer portal to give Sawyer (Robertson) some weapons out wide. We also think we have a game-changer at tight end in Michael Trigg.”

Two key transfers at receiver are Kobe Prentice (Alabama) and Kole Wilson (Texas State). Prentice, a former top-100 recruit, had 60 career catches at Alabama. Wilson caught 43 passes for 630 yards and four touchdowns last year.

Tight end Michael Trigg (30 catches, 395 yards, 3 TDs) is seen as the offense’s X-factor. Spavital credited his increased involvement as a key to sparking Baylor’s six-game winning streak to close the season.

The running game should provide balance. Baylor’s top two rushers—Bryson Washington and Dawson Pendergrass—are back. Washington ran for 1,028 yards and 12 touchdowns. Pendergrass added 671 yards and six scores. Joseph Dodds and freshman Caden Knighten are also in the mix.

The offensive line is experienced, returning four starters. Sidney Fugar’s emergence at left tackle was a game changer, per Spavital. The only new starter is expected to be Kaden Sieracki at right tackle, replacing Campbell Barrington.

Where Legends Begin

BY THE

NUMBERS

34.4 – That’s the number of points Baylor scored per game in 2024, which ranked 19th in the FBS and was fourth most in the state of Texas.

46 – The Bears were the fourth-best offense in allowing tackles for loss behind only run-oriented option teams New Mexico, Army, and Navy.

79 – That’s the total number of 20-plus yard plays for the Bears last year, which was sixth-best in America and tops in the Big 12.

KEEP AN EYE ON

The Bears signed the 40th best recruiting class in the country last year and a few of those true freshmen could make an instant impact on the offensive side of the ball. Running back Caden Knighten received high marks in the spring. Wide receiver Taz Williams Jr. (Red Oak) was a three-star recruit who is a Top 100 wide receiver in the nation. The Bears also signed wide receivers Chase Collier, Jacorey Watson, Ashton Jones and tight end Brody Wilhelm. Experienced depth in the two-deep could cause most, if not all, to redshirt. The staff loves quarterback Edward Griffin.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

WR KOLE WILSON

The Texas State transfer played in 25 games over two years for the Bobcats, hauling in 109 catches for 1,377 yards and 12 touchdowns. He’ll excel in Jake Spavital’s offense and can also help on kickoff returns. Wilson began his career at Incarnate Word.

RB JOSEPH DODDS

A Top 100 in-state prospect in the 2024 class, who starred at Tidehaven High School, took a redshirt last season while recovering from injury. There is a spot open at RB3 behind Bryson Washington and Dawson Pendergrass and Dodds could offer a change of pace.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#13 Sawyer
QB Robertson
6-4, 220, SR.
LUBBOCK CORONADO

#30 Bryson
RB Washington
6-0, 203, SO.
FRANKLIN

#34 Josh
WR Cameron
6-1, 218, SR.
CEDAR PARK

#19 Kole
WR Wilson
5-9, 165, SR.
KATY PAETOW

#16 Kobe
WR Prentice
5-10, 182, SR.
CALERA, ALA.

#1 Michael
TE Trigg
6-4, 246, SR.
TAMPA, FLA.

#69 Sidney
LT Fugar
6-5, 341, SR.
WALDORF, MD.

#62 Ryan
LG Lengyel
6-5, 310, SR.
DALLAS JESUIT

#72 Coleton
C Price
6-3, 314, JR.
BOWIE

#68 Omar
RG Aigbedion
6-3, 310, SR.
KATY

#74 Kaden
RT Sieracki
6-4, 314, JR.
THE WOODLANDS

#95 Rhett
K Armstrong
6-5, 195, FR.
MONUMENT, COLO.

THE DEFENSE

Baylor head coach Dave Aranda put his defensive coordinator hat back on and called plays for the Bears last season. The unit allowed 33.3 points per game in 2023, ranking 116th nationally in scoring defense. Last year, it improved to 26.7 points per game and 81st in scoring defense. Not great, but a step forward.

"I thought we improved as the season went on in a lot of areas, but we need to get even better this year," Aranda admitted. "The guys played hard, so effort wasn't an issue. But we're cleaning up the finer points of the defense and working on playing faster and more confidently."

The linebacker unit should again be the strength of the defense despite the loss of Matt Jones. Keaton Thomas (114 tackles, 7 TFL, 2.5 sacks) returns to anchor the second level and provide leadership. Aranda and the Baylor staff believe Thomas has a 10-year NFL future. He'll be flanked by FIU transfer Travion Barnes, the 2024 Conference USA Defensive Player of the Year after ranking fifth nationally with 129 tackles (11.73 per game). Barnes missed the spring while rehabbing from offseason surgery.

The arrival of Texas A&M transfer nose guard Samu Taumanupepe gives Baylor a much-needed big body in the middle. Listed at 380 pounds, he was closer to 370 during spring and is expected to play at 350–360. The closer he gets to that target, the greater his potential impact due to more playable snaps. His presence also allows Cooper Lanz to move to boundary defensive end in Baylor's three-man front, a better fit at 288 pounds.

Defensive end Jackie Marshall is poised for a breakout season, according to the staff. He graded well last season, and a move to field end should create more backfield opportunities. Devonte Tezino is another name to know on the defensive line.

Edge rusher remains the biggest unknown. The group produced only 23 sacks in 2024, and the top three sack leaders—Jones, Treven Ma'ae, and Garmon Randolph—are gone, as is Steve Linton, who was fifth on the team in sacks. Those four accounted for 14 sacks. Baylor needs transfers Emar'ion Winston (Oregon) and Matthew Fobbs-White (Tulane) to boost edge pressure.

The secondary must improve for Baylor to become an elite defense in the Big 12. The Bears allowed 234.2 yards per game, which ranked 94th out of 134 teams. Aranda hopes a bounce back season from cornerback Caden Jenkins is in the cards. Other players in the mix at cornerback include Tevin Williams and transfers Calvin Simpson-Hunt, Caldera Williford, and KJ Makins. One safety spot is Devyn Bobby's, while the other is a competition between transfers Devin Turner and Tyler Turner – no relation.

BY THE NUMBERS

26.7 – Baylor allowed nearly 27 points per game and ranked 81st nationally in scoring defense as Dave Aranda called the defense for the first time in Waco.

14 – That's the number of interceptions tallied by the Baylor defense, which was 27th in the country and fourth most in Texas behind Texas, Texas A&M, and SMU.

63.33 – The Bears struggled with fourth-down defense and allowed first downs on 19 of their opponents' 30 attempts. They ranked 111th in opponents' fourth down conversion percentage.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Carl Williams IV returns and is expected to start once again at the nickel position, but don't be surprised if Kendrick Simpkins earns a role in the safety rotation as a run-stuffing defensive back who can also provide some pressure from the third level of the defense. The 6-foot, 207-pounder suffered a regular-season ending injury against Colorado and didn't return until the bowl game. He only played in four regular season games and that allowed him to maintain a redshirt and return for his sixth season. Simpkins began his college career at Western Kentucky, where he started 22 times over 42 games.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

OLB MATTHEW FOBBS-WHITE

One of the only glaring question marks for Baylor entering 2025 is off the edge. The Tulane transfer could emerge as the next pass rushing threat for the Bears after totaling 7.5 tackles for loss and four sacks with a PFF pass-rush grade of 91.3.

DB CALVIN SIMPSON-HUNT

Played nine games last year for the national champion Ohio State Buckeyes. Simpson-Hunt is a Waxahachie product who transferred to Baylor with three seasons of eligibility left. He took a redshirt in 2023 and registered four tackles over his two seasons. He can play cornerback or safety.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#0 Jackie Marshall
DE

6-3, 290, SR.
LA PLACE, LA.

#97 Cooper Lanz
NT

6-3, 288, SR.
DENTON

#59 Devonte Tezino
DT

6-5, 294, JR.
KILLEEN

#32 Emar'ion Winston
OLB

6-4, 255, JR.
PORTLAND, ORE.

#11 Keaton Thomas
MLB

6-2, 224, JR.
JACKSONVILLE, FLA.

#36 Travion Barnes
MLB

6-0, 224, SR.
ALMONTE SPRINGS, FLA.

#15 Carl Williams IV
NB

6-1, 184, JR.
BATON ROUGE, LA.

#8 Caden Jenkins
CB

6-1, 177, JR.
LEWISVILLE

#27 Tevin Williams III
CB

6-1, 188, SR.
STILLWATER, OKLA.

#13 Devin Turner
SS

6-2, 212, SR.
FRISCO

#3 Devyn Bobby
FS

5-11, 196, SR.
DESOTO

#94 Palmer Williams
P

6-2, 201, JR.
ADVANCE, N.C.



BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS
FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

“Getting settled at offensive coordinator really helped that program because (Jake) Spavital has done a nice job there in Waco. Offense was their Achilles heel because they struggled to find a system and a quarterback but they had both last year. They’ve done a nice job recruiting, their team looks good, they play hard and physical. I thought they were honestly the best football team we played last year.”

“They’re loaded offensively. It would not surprise me if they were in the Big 12 championship. At the end of last year, they were as good as anybody in the Big 12. They’re a really, really good football team, especially offensively. It is interesting, though, that it has been the defense that’s driven whenever they’ve had successful years.”

“Credit to Baylor for not pulling the plug during the open week last year and giving Dave a chance to turn that around. And credit to him and his team for pulling it off.”

DC
TXDave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALLCOLLEGE
BAYLOR BEARS

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Keaton THOMAS

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Photo Credit: David Buono/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images

Where Legends Begin

SCHEDULE & PREDICTIONS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 29	AUBURN	W	Oct. 25	at Cincinnati	W
Sept. 6	at SMU	L	Nov. 1	UCF	W
Sept. 13	SAMFORD	W	Nov. 15	UTAH	L
Sept. 20	ARIZONA STATE	L	Nov. 22	at Arizona	W
Sept. 27	at Oklahoma State	W	Nov. 29	HOUSTON	W
Oct. 4	KANSAS STATE	L			
Oct. 18	at TCU	W			

Record: 8-4 (6-3)

BIGGEST GAME — SEPT. 20 VS. ARIZONA STATE

Baylor enters the season with Big 12 title aspirations and what better way to lay a marker down early in the season than to beat the defending champs at home in the conference opener? The Bears also host fellow Big 12 contender Kansas State two weeks later.

TRAP GAME — SEPT. 27 AT OKLAHOMA STATE

The first seven games of Baylor's season include Auburn, SMU, Arizona State, Kansas State, and TCU. Three of those games are at home. One contest that might sneak up on the Bears during that run is a trip to Stillwater to face Mike Gundy's unpredictable Cowboys.

UPSET GAME — SEPT. 6 AT SMU

Baylor starts the season at home against Auburn before traveling to the Hilltop to face an SMU squad that reached the College Football Playoff last season. A 2-0 start would provide the Bears with momentum to make a run at the Big 12 title and a trip to the College Football Playoff.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING: 11-1

The boom potential for a Baylor team that returns nearly every offensive starter and a strong nucleus of defenders is immense. The first seven games of the season will tell the story and a hot start with wins over Auburn and SMU would shoot the Bears stock to the moon.

FLOOR: 7-5

Even an improved Baylor team could watch its record take a hit thanks to a tough schedule, especially at the beginning of the season. A 1-3 start is possible because of early games against Auburn, SMU, and Arizona State. The Bears also play Kansas State and TCU before the end of October.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 31	Tarleton	W, 45-3	Oct. 26	Oklahoma State	W, 38-28
Sept. 7	at Utah	L, 23-12	Nov. 2	TCU	W, 37-34
Sept. 14	Air Force	W, 31-3	Nov. 16	at West Virginia	W, 49-35
Sept. 21	at Colorado	L, 38-31 (OT)	Nov. 23	at Houston	W, 20-10
Sept. 28	BYU	L, 34-28	Nov. 30	Kansas	W, 45-17
Oct. 5	at Iowa State	L, 43-21	Dec. 31	LSU (Texas Bowl)	L, 44-31
Oct. 19	at Texas Tech	W, 59-35			

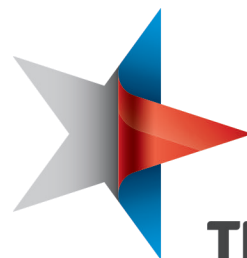
Record: 8-5 (6-3)



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Three **GEMS****TAZ WILLIAMS JR.**

Williams is known for his track speed and ability to create big plays. He's quick off the line, sharp in and out of his breaks, and dangerous in open space. He is a twitchy and explosive weapon who can line up inside or outside and has experience making plays in the return game.

KALEB BURNS

A two-time district Defensive MVP and four-star talent, Burns has elite burst and plays downhill with a punishing edge. He chose Baylor over Oregon and Oklahoma, improving in coverage as a senior. Known as one of the state's best edge blitzers, he brings ready-to-play versatility and a relentless motor to the linebacker room.

KAMAURYN MORGAN

A long, rangy edge rusher with verified wingspan and twitch, Morgan opened eyes as an early enrollee. A product of Red Oak and South Oak Cliff, he's a proven winner with physical upside. Baylor fans should be excited—if Morgan commits fully, he has NFL measurables and elite one-on-one pass-rushing potential.

DC
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BAYLOR BEARS

78

Colin **PEACOCK**

Photo Credit: Greg Powers

RECRUITING BREAKDOWN

the **EXPERT'S TAKE**RECRUITING
GRADE**B+****DCTF RECRUITING ANALYST GREG POWERS**

Baylor surged over 20 spots in the national rankings, signaling a renewed approach under Dave Aranda that embraces the realities of modern recruiting. The Bears signed 21 high school prospects, mostly from in-state, and built one of their most well-rounded classes in years. The wide receiver group stands out as a major win, featuring a variety of play styles and led by the most offered player in Texas. Defensively, Baylor added versatile defensive linemen to restock the front. Khenon Hall and Matthew Powlledge deserve shoutouts—recruits consistently praised their energy and authenticity.

2025 RECRUITING CLASS**HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE (247Sports Rank: 39th)**

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Leo Almanza	CB	6-1	175	Trophy Club Byron Nelson
Rhett Armstrong	K	6-5	195	Palmer Ridge (CO)
Jackson Blackwell	DL	6-3	305	Lorena
Demetrius Brisbon	QB	5-11	165	Tyler Chapel Hill
Kaleb Burns	LB	6-0	220	Cy Falls
Harrison Cluff	OL	6-4	295	Columbia
Chase Collier	WR	6-1	165	The Bolles School (FL)
Edward Griffin	QB	6-1	205	Coppell
Christopher Johnson	DL	6-3	240	Iowa Colony
Ashton Jones	WR	6-4	185	Shadow Creek
Caden Knighten	RB	5-11	205	Pauls Valley (OK)
Kamaurn Morgan	Edge	6-4	230	South Oak Cliff
Bo Onu	S	6-0	195	Hebron
Matthew Parker	OT	6-7	295	Jackson Prep (MS)
Colin Peacock	S	6-1	185	Gunter
Trent Spence	LB	6-2	220	Klein Collins
Michael Turner	RB	6-0	200	Richland
Jacorey Watson	WR	5-10	175	Shadow Creek
Brody Wilhelm	TE	6-5	215	Austin Westlake
Taz Williams Jr.	WR	6-0	190	Red Oak
Ke'Breion Winston	LB	6-1	200	Lancaster

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 48th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Travion Barnes	LB	6-0	225	FIU
Louis Brown IV	WR	6-2	195	Colorado State
Connor Cameron	OT	6-6	300	Arizona State
Joe Crocker	OT	6-6	310	Louisville
Placide Djungu-Sungu	S	6-1	195	Duke
Matthew Fobbs-White	Edge	6-3	230	Tulane
Adonis Frloux	DL	6-2	325	Tulane
Phoenix Jackson	LB	6-0	220	Fresno State
Jaylin Jones	EDGE	6-5	225	UTEP
Tyler Kirkwood	WR	6-0	185	Southern
Drake Knobloch	LS	6-3	255	Iowa State
Alessandro Lorenzetti	OT	6-5	285	Michigan
KJ Makins	CB	5-11	180	Houston Christian
Kobe Prentice	WR	5-10	190	Alabama
Calvin Simpson-Hunt	CB	6-0	205	Ohio State
Samu Taumanupepe	DL	6-3	350	Texas A&M
Devin Turner	S	6-1	210	Northwestern
Tyler Turner	S	6-0	190	Oregon
Walker White	QB	6-3	220	Auburn
Caldra Williford	CB	5-9	170	Tennessee Tech
Kole Wilson	WR	5-9	170	Texas State
Emar'ion Winston	Edge	6-4	255	Oregon

UNDER THE RADAR**CADEN KNIGHTEN**

Knighten was a small-town Oklahoma secret who slipped out of the Sooners' backyard. Don't let the quiet recruitment fool you—he's drawing early praise in Waco. With his balance, quick feet, and vision, Knighten could be the next big back for Baylor once he breaks into the rotation.

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Ashton Jeanty

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2013: BRYCE PETTY
QB, BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

2014: TREVONE BOYKIN
QB, TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

2015: GREG WARD, JR.
QB, UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

2016: D'ONTA FOREMAN
RB, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

2017: BAKER MAYFIELD
QB, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

2018: KYLER MURRAY
QB, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

2019: J.K. DOBBINS
RB, THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

2020: KYLE TRASK
QB, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2021: BAILEY ZAPPE
QB, WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

2022: MAX DUGGAN
QB, TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

2023: OLLIE GORDON, II
RB, OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

2024: ASHTON JEANTY
RB, BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

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BY MIKE CRAVENCHANGE IS THE ONLY CONSTANT
WITH RESURGENT COOGS

Willie Fritz doesn't mind being called old-fashioned. He built a reputation in college football as a program builder and enjoyed constructing his roster in the traditional sense. Fritz, 65, wasn't a stranger to inheriting programs that needed rebuilding. But, like everyone else over the past few years, he's had to learn to use different building materials.

Fritz followed a familiar model when he took over at Blinn Junior College, Central Missouri, Sam Houston State, or Tulane: retain players, develop them, and reap the rewards by Year 3—sometimes even sooner. Like Novocain, it always worked if given time.

Blinn went undefeated and won national championships in Years 3 and 4. Sam Houston reached the Division I national title game in Years 2 and 3. Tulane reached the AAC championship game in Year 3. The only place he hit the ground running was at Georgia Southern.

The game has changed, and Fritz knows he must evolve. He's one of the only coaches in college football history to lead programs in JUCO, Division II, FCS, G6, and now P4. His first head coaching job came in 1993. He's evolved five times over.

"There are different rules now with the transfer portal and NIL, so there's a different way [to build]," Fritz said. "What hurt me last year was coming in a week later than everybody else and making decisions based on where we were while still familiarizing myself with the new rules. The timing was a little tough."

He won the same number of games — four — in Year 1 at Houston as he did at Tulane. Victories over TCU and Kansas State headlined his first season in Third Ward. It was Fritz's first year as a Power Four coach, and he left with lessons about the league.

"The big difference I've seen from the Group of Five to the Power Four is that everybody's pretty good," Fritz said. "You've got to compete every week, bring your A-game every week. I think we've got more players on the roster this year who can do that."

In many ways, Fritz and Houston aren't building on Year 1 so much as starting fresh. He hired new coordinators on both sides of the ball: Slade Nagle, who coached with Fritz at Tulane, is the new offensive coordinator; Austin Armstrong takes over the defense. The Cougars could start as many as nine transfers on offense, and at least a handful on defense. While the faults are clear, the transfer portal offers an opportunity for a

program like Houston to make a giant leap in Year 2.

"Obviously, our offense struggled big time last season and we had to get better in that area. I've got a lot of confidence in Slade Nagle," Fritz said. "We did a good job with the transfer portal, and I think we signed a dynamite freshman class. We look quite a bit different than we did last season."

Another reason for optimism: life in the Big 12. Baylor improved from two wins in 2020 to conference champions in 2021—Dave Aranda's second season. TCU reached the national championship game in 2022 a year after missing a bowl. Last year, Arizona State was picked to finish last in the Big 12 before winning the title and reaching the College Football Playoff in Kenny Dillingham's second year.

"We've used Arizona State as a template for how we want to accomplish things," Fritz said. "I was at the Peach Bowl, and they would have, should have, could have won that game against Texas. In this conference, teams can make big jumps from one year to the next."

Willie Fritz was forced to hit the reset button on his reclamation project in Third Ward after Year 1. The Cougars replaced offensive coordinator Kevin Barbay with Slade Nagle, who worked with Fritz at Tulane, after Houston finished 133 out of 134 FBS teams in scoring last year. Nagle overhauled the offensive roster with transfers, including former five-star Conner Weigman.

Defensively, the Cougars were forced to make a change when Texas Tech hired Shiel Wood as defensive coordinator. A bowl game is the floor. The Big 12's volatility allows for bigger dreams if the transfers hit.

**Conner WEIGMAN**

A year after starting at quarterback for Texas A&M, the signal-caller found a new home at Houston, where he'll trigger the Coogs' attack.

DCTX

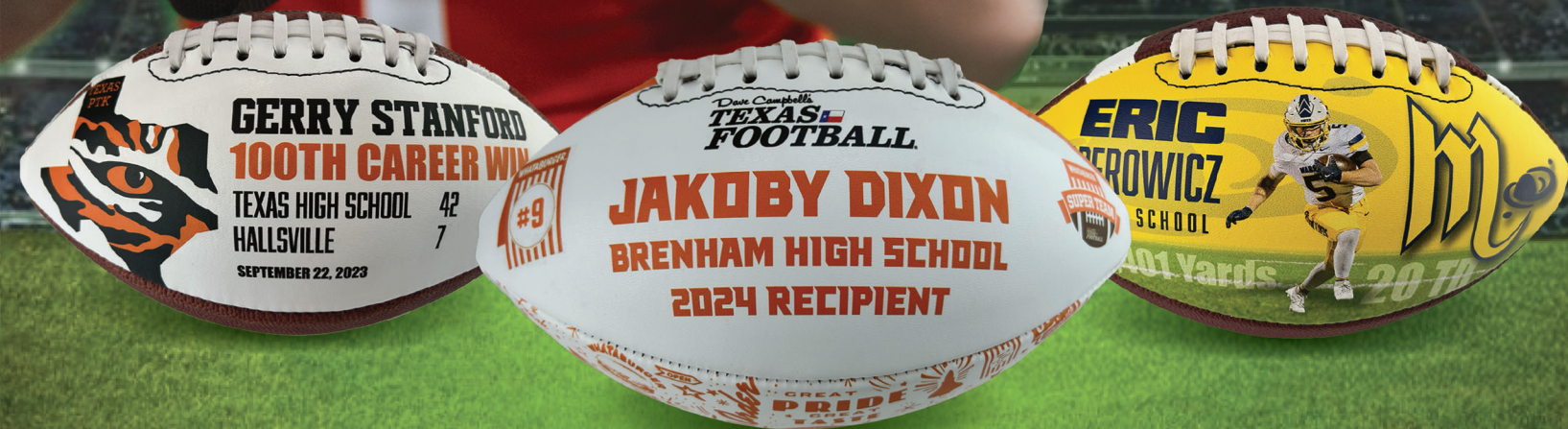
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THE OFFENSE

The Cougars made a change at offensive coordinator after finishing 133rd out of 134 FBS teams in scoring offense with just 14 points per game. Only a winless Kent State squad scored fewer. Houston tied with Florida State for last in total touchdowns, with only 20.

Fritz dipped into his past to find help in the present, hiring Slade Nagle as his new offensive coordinator after the two worked well together at Tulane. Nagle was an assistant at LSU last year and described his offensive philosophy as “inside out,” emphasizing physicality, running the football, and creating big plays in the passing game.

Nagle isn't the only new face on the Houston offense. The unit could start as many as nine transfers, including quarterback Conner Weigman. The former Texas A&M five-star from nearby Cypress Bridgeland never lived up to the hype in College Station due to coaching changes and frequent injuries. The hope is a new system and a fresh start in the Big 12 unlocks Weigman's potential.

“Conner has been great. He's a really good decision-maker and a natural leader,” Nagle said in the spring. “The one thing that surprised me is how well he moves. He's more mobile than I expected watching film.”

Zeon Chriss, who played in 11 games and started seven at quarterback last year, returns as the primary backup. The 6-foot-3 junior is a plus athlete and could carve out a role with his legs.

Houston also replenished the receiver and tight end rooms. The Coogs added Amare Thomas (UAB) and Harvey Broussard III (Louisiana) at wideout, and Luke McGary (Tulsa) and Tanner Koziol (Wisconsin) at tight end. Houston returns its leading receiver from 2024, Stephon Johnson, who caught 32 passes for 402 yards and two scores.

The running back room was called “the deepest position on the offense,” per Nagle. Rice transfer Dean Connors gives the Cougars a dangerous weapon—he led all FBS backs with 62 receptions and also rushed for 780 yards. He's joined by Re'Shaun Sanford II, Stacy Sneed, and J'Marion Burnette. The staff moved JayShon Ridgle from wide receiver to running back in the spring.

No position was overhauled more than the offensive line. Houston expects at least three new starters. Left tackle David Ndukwe and center Demetrius Hunter return. The Cougars added tackles Dalton Merryman (Texas Tech) and Alvin Ebosele (Baylor), guards Jason Brooks Jr. (Oklahoma State) and Matthew Wykoff (Cal), and New Mexico transfer McKenzie Agnello, who can play center or guard.

“Our offensive line had to improve for us to have a chance in the Big 12,” Fritz said. “We've got a lot more Power Four bodies up front this season. We'll be able to move some people around with this group.”

BY THE

NUMBERS

133 – That's where Houston's scoring offense ranked in 2024 while accounting for only 14 points per game. There are 134 teams in the FBS.

152.7 – That's the average passing yards per game last year for the Coogs, which was 126th in the nation, and worst in the Big 12 and state of Texas.

20 – Houston was tied with Florida State with an FBS-low 20 touchdowns scored in 12 games. No other team scored fewer than 22.

KEEP AN EYE ON

The lack of a vertical passing game was one of the biggest hindrances for the Houston offense last year. The Cougars ranked 118th nationally in yards per attempt at 6.5, sandwiched between Central Michigan and Kent State. Offensive coordinator Slade Nagle hopes to change that in 2025. When he was the offensive coordinator at Tulane in 2023, the Green Wave averaged 8.2 yards per attempt, which ranked 29th in the FBS. Adding Conner Weigman at quarterback along with wide receiver Stephon Johnson and a host of transfers at the skill positions should allow the Coogs to push the ball downfield in 2025.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

TE TANNER KOZIOL

A senior who led Ball State with 94 catches for 839 yards and eight touchdowns last year. He spent the spring at Wisconsin before re-entering the transfer portal and landing with the Coogs in April. Koziol caught 34 passes for 295 yards and three touchdowns in 2023.

RB J'MARION BURNETTE

The running back room is stacked in Third Ward but that won't stop the big-bodied Burnette, nicknamed “Fat”, from carving out a niche. At 230 pounds, he can be a weapon in short yardage situations and in the red zone. He led all Big 12 true freshmen with 116 rushing yards after contact.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#1 Conner
QB Weigman

6-3, 215, JR.
CYPRESS BRIDGELAND

#44 Dean
RB Connors

6-0, 206, SR.
KAMUELA, HAWAII

#5 Stephon
WR Johnson

6-2, 188, SR.
DESOTO

#3 Harvey
WR Broussard III

6-3, 185, JR.
ST. MARTINVILLE, LA.

#0 Amare
WR Thomas

6-0, 205, JR.
BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

#87 Luke
TE McGary

6-4, 250, JR.
PLANO PRESTONWOOD

#77 David
LT Ndukwe

6-6, 325, SR.
DECATUR, GA.

#73 Jason
LG Brooks Jr.

6-4, 315, SR.
PASADENA DOBIE

#66 McKenzie
C Agnello

6-4, 314, SR.
COPPERAS COVE

#74 Matthew
RG Wykoff

6-6, 325, SR.
MAGNOLIA

#75 Dalton
RT Merryman

6-9, 305, SR.
MONTGOMERY

#92 Ethan
K Sanchez

5-9, 192, SR.
DALLAS, GA.

DC
TX

Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
HOUSTON COUGARS

THE DEFENSE

The good news for Houston last year was that its defense was excellent, helping the Cougars pull off Big 12 upsets against TCU and Kansas State. The bad news? Shiel Wood's unit was so strong that Texas Tech poached him with a big raise for the same role.

Enter Austin Armstrong. Houston's new defensive coordinator spent the last two seasons at Florida, with previous stops at Louisiana, Georgia, and Southern Miss. He runs a similar scheme to what Houston used last year, rooted in the early-1990s Cleveland Browns when Bill Belichick and Nick Saban were on staff.

"The multiplicity of this defense gives you the illusion that a lot is going on, even when it isn't," Armstrong said. "We can base out of a three- or four-man front depending on our personnel and matchup. We're typically in nickel with five defensive backs on the field."

The secondary looked like the team's strength before safety A.J. Haulcy and cornerback Jeremiah Wilson hit the transfer portal after spring practice. Starting corner Latrell McCutchin Sr. may be the only returning starter in the secondary. Houston brought in seven defenders during the spring portal window, including four defensive backs. Two—cornerback Keany Parks and safety Wrook Brown—arrived from Wyoming.

Southern Miss transfer Will James can play all five spots in the secondary and may end up at cornerback after Wilson's departure. JD Rhym and newcomers like Zelmar Vedder (Sacramento State) and Kenny Parks (Wyoming) are also in the mix. LSU transfer Jordan Allen is the favorite to replace Haulcy at boundary safety, while Georgia Southern's Marc Stampley II exited spring as the starter at nickel, which Armstrong calls the "Star."

Carlos Allen Jr. and Brandon Mack II return to anchor the defensive line. Allen is a stout defensive tackle and strong run-stopper. Mack plays a hybrid end/linebacker spot called "Jack," a jack-of-all-trades role. Transfers Joshua Donald and Khalil Laufau will push for time inside alongside Allen, Xavier Stillman, and Zavian Tibbs. The Coogs also added Tennessee Tech's Myles Parker in the spring.

"Football starts up front, and the good defenses I've been around are tough in the trenches," Armstrong said. "I like our starting point."

The Cougars lost major production at linebacker with Michael Batton and Jamal Morris graduating, so they turned to the portal for help. Carmyciah Glass (Louisiana) and Sione Fotu (Utah) are battling for starting roles next to returners Corey Platt Jr. and Jalen Garner. Houston also added Tulane's Jesus Machado and FIU's Eddie Walls III in the spring.

BY THE NUMBERS

22.9 – That's how many points a stingy Houston defense allowed per game in Year 1 of the Willie Fritz era, which was good enough for 40th in the FBS.

134 – Only one team allowed fewer 10-plus yard plays than the Cougars and that was an Indiana team that qualified for the College Football Playoff.

214 – Houston finished in the Top 10 nationally in first downs allowed last year, checking in at a tie for ninth with Nebraska and Rice.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Armstrong says the field defensive end position opposite of the Jack is arguably the most influential spot in his defensive system. "When our defenses have been good in the past, this position was one of the main reasons," he said in the spring. The competition for the starting spot was encouraging for the Cougars in the spring with redshirt freshman Darius Washington and senior Quindario Lee battling it out. Both will play plenty of snaps regardless of who is named the starter. Lee began his career at Central Michigan and played in all 12 games for Houston last year in his first season on campus.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

OLB EDDIE WALLS III

Houston added the edge rusher from FIU following spring practices and he should compete for snaps off the edge with the likes of Brandon Mack II and Latreveon McCutchin. Walls totaled 30 tackles, including six for loss and five sacks last year in Conference USA.

LB JESUS MACHADO

A Tulane transfer who was added in the spring window, Machado started twice last year while playing in all 14 games for the Green Wave. He recorded 40 tackles. He was a three-star prospect out of Miami when he was recruited to Tulane by Houston head coach Willie Fritz.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#5 Carlos
DE Allen Jr.

6-1, 295, SR.
ATLANTA, GA.

#95 Joshua
NT Donald

6-2, 320, SR.
DURHAM, N.C.

#18 Khalil
DT Laufau

6-3, 293, JR.
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

#4 Brandon
DOG Mack II

6-4, 245, SR.
MONTGOMERY, ALA.

#36 Jalen
MLB Garner

6-1, 225, SR.
NORCROSS, GA.

#25 Carmyciah
WLB Glass

6-4, 230, JR.
MONROE, LA.

#22 Marc
ANC Stampley II

5-11, 185, SR.
PEACHTREE, GA.

#15 Will
CB James

6-0, 185, SO.
GRAND BAY, ALA.

#1 Latrell
CB McCutchin

6-1, 185, SR.
AUSTIN, TX

#6 Jordan
FS Allen

5-11, 199, SO.
LAFAYETTE, LA.

#13 C.J.
SS Douglas

5-10, 195, JR.
LEEDS, ALA.

#91 Liam
P Dougherty

6-2, 205, SO.
GEELONG, AUSTRALIA

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HOUSTON COUGARS

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS
FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

“(Fritz) is one of the best college coaches in the country. Is Houston going to give him the resources it takes to get him to where he needs to be?”

“My worry for Willie at Houston is two-fold. One, Houston is lower on the totem pole with money and resources, at least that’s how it seems in recruiting and in the portal, and in today’s landscape, how do you win in the Big 12 without that backing when Texas Tech and other places are throwing around tons of money. Two, does the old way even work anymore? Like, he builds programs from the inside and he’s probably the best at it over the last 20 or 30 years, but that’s just not how this sport works anymore. He’ll have to adapt. I’m sure he will. I’m just not sure it’ll work there unless they jump into the deep end on NIL and revenue sharing.”

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TEXAS FOOTBALLCOLLEGE
HOUSTON COUGARS

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Carlos ALLEN JR.

Photo Credit: Houston Athletics

Where Legends Begin

SCHEDULE & PREDICTIONS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 28	SFA	W	Oct. 25	at Arizona State	L
Sept. 6	at Rice	W	Nov. 1	West Virginia	W
Sept. 12	Colorado	L	Nov. 7	at UCF	W
Sept. 27	at Oregon State	W	Nov. 22	TCU	L
Oct. 4	Texas Tech	L	Nov. 29	at Baylor	L
Oct. 11	at Oklahoma State	L			
Oct. 18	Arizona	W			

Record: 6-6 (3-6)

BIGGEST GAME — SEPT. 12 VS. COLORADO

Houston should start the season 2-0 with winnable matchups against SFA and Rice before hosting the Buffaloes in Week 3. Upset Deion Sanders' squad as Colorado works to replace Shedeur Sanders and Travis Hunter and the Coogs are 3-0 and one win away from matching the 2024 win total.

TRAP GAME — SEPT. 6 AT RICE

The Owls won the last Bayou Bucket that was played at Historic Rice Stadium when Mike Bloomgren's squad outlasted Dana Holgorsen's Cougars in overtime. Wille Fritz must avoid the same fate against a Rice team transitioning to the option under Scott Abell.

UPSET GAME — OCT. 4 VS. TEXAS TECH

Houston upset TCU on the road and Kansas State at home during Year 1 of the Willie Fritz era. Texas Tech has struggled on the road and early in the season in the first three years of the Joey McGuire era.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING: 8-4

There is always one Big 12 team predicted to finish in the cellar that overachieves and Willie Fritz hopes it is his Cougars as he enters Year 2. The schedule sets up nicely early on with winnable games against SFA, Rice, and Oregon State. Houston gets Texas Tech and TCU at home.

FLOOR: 2-10

SFA and Rice are the only true slam dunks on the schedule for the Coogs. The Big 12 is a buzzsaw and continued offensive woes would put Houston in a tough spot considering that the defense can't play much better than it did last year.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 31	UNLV	L, 27-7	Oct. 26	Utah	W, 17-14
Sept. 7	at Oklahoma	L, 16-12	Nov. 2	Kansas State	W, 24-19
Sept. 14	Rice	W, 33-7	Nov. 15	at Arizona	L, 27-3
Sept. 21	at Cincinnati	L, 34-0	Nov. 23	Baylor	L, 20-10
Sept. 28	Iowa State	L, 20-0	Nov. 30	at BYU	L, 30-18
Oct. 4	at TCU	W, 30-19			
Oct. 19	at Kansas	L, 42-14			

Record: 4-8 (3-6)

RECRUITING BREAKDOWN

Three GEMS

DEMETRIS DEAN

Dean is a nasty finisher and versatile offensive lineman with the athleticism to play tackle or slide inside. He dominated as a run blocker and holds a four-star rating comparable to former Cougar standout Demetrius Hunter. Houston fans should be excited—Dean brings attitude, size, and upside to the trenches.

DK MAYS

While the defensive line class at Houston is loaded with talent, Mays has been generating significant buzz behind the scenes. His raw power and ability to shed blockers have impressed coaches, and though he wasn't an early enrollee, expect him to quickly rise as a disruptive force with massive upside.

AUSTIN CARLISLE

Carlisle's dual-threat playmaking and leadership give him future QB1 potential. Known for his calm under pressure and ability to throw on the run, he's a gamer with a fun-to-watch style. Once he gets a shot in Houston's offense, don't be surprised if he becomes a fan favorite.

the EXPERT'S TAKE

RECRUITING
GRADE

B

DCTF RECRUITING ANALYST GREG POWERS

Houston is operating under a new standard as a Big 12 program, and head coach Willie Fritz has wasted no time raising the bar. The Cougars finished with the No. 42 class in the country—well above the averages during the Dana Holgorsen era. Fourteen of the 19 high school signees hail from Texas, showing a clear focus on in-state recruiting. Fritz and his staff continue to evaluate well, targeting high-ceiling prospects who can develop into Big 12 playmakers. Their proven ability to find under-the-radar talent in Louisiana remains part of the formula, but Houston's future is being built in-state.

2025 RECRUITING CLASS

HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE (247Sports Rank: 42nd)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Carmello Brooks	DL	6-3	275	Katy Paetow
Chance Bryant	DL	6-2	240	Fulshear
Travis Buhake	DL	6-2	255	Mansfield Summit
Austin Carlisle	QB	5-10	185	Fort Bend Ridge Point
Zaylen Cormier	WR	5-11	180	Houston Heights
Demetris Dean	OL	6-4	280	Jasper
Wyatt Herbel	TE	6-3	210	Cy-Fair
Blake Hogshooter	WR	6-4	190	Bixby (OK)
Tristan Jackson	LB	6-0	200	Choctawhatchee (FL)
RJ Lee	OL	6-8	335	Houston Second Baptist
Jaquise Martin	WR	5-10	180	Bryan Rudder
DK Mays	DL	6-4	250	Baton Rouge Central (LA)
Sheldon Rice	Edge	6-3	235	Fulshear
Reshad Sterling	Edge	6-3	245	Lutcher (LA)
Sadrick Terrell	OL	6-5	280	Klein Oak
Eythan Thompson	OL	6-3	310	Waco La Vega
Jacory Thurman	TE	6-4	225	Houston Worthing
Richmond Ugochukwu	LB	6-1	210	Richardson Barkner
Kenzy West	WR	6-1	185	Hartfield Academy (MS)

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 27th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
McKenzie Agnello	OT	6-4	315	New Mexico
Jordan Allen	S	5-11	200	LSU
Jason Brooks Jr.	LOL	6-3	310	Oklahoma State
Harvey Broussard III	WR	6-3	185	Louisiana
Wrook Brown	S	5-11	181	Wyoming
Dean Connors	RB	6-0	205	Rice
Joshua Donald	DL	6-1	320	Appalachian State
C.J. Douglas	S	5-10	195	Samford
Alvin Ebosele	OT	6-6	310	Baylor
Sione Fotu	LB	6-0	225	Utah
Carmycah Glass	LB	6-4	240	Louisiana
Will James	CB	6-0	185	Southern Miss
Tanner Koziol	TE	6-6	255	Wisconsin
Khalil Laufau	DL	6-3	295	Washington State
Jesus Machado	LB	6-1	220	Tulane
Luke McGary	TE	6-3	240	Tulsa
Dalton Merryman	OT	6-9	305	Texas Tech
Myles Parker	DL	5-11	345	Tennessee Tech
Keany Parks	CB	6-1	187	Wyoming
Kelonte Scott	CB	6-0	190	Auburn
Marc Stampely II	S	5-11	180	Georgia Southern
Amare Thomas	WR	6-0	205	UAB
Blake Thompson	S	6-1	191	Louisiana Tech
Zelmar Vedder	CB	6-3	193	Sacramento State
Eddie Walls III	EDGE	6-4	247	FIU
Conner Weigman	QB	6-3	220	Texas A&M
Matthew Wykoff	LOL	6-6	325	Cal
Zac Yoakum	K	5-8	196	Notre Dame

UNDER THE RADAR

ZAYLEN CORMIER

Cormier was overlooked by some but has made a strong early impression in Houston. A fluid route runner with YAC ability, he shines on screens and sweeps. Originally considered a safety by some programs, UH recognized his offensive value. Buzz from inside the program suggests he's a real steal.

Demetris DEAN

Photo Credit: Andy Tallent

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BY MIKE CRAVEN**FROGS LEAN ON DEPTH,
STABILITY TO REBOUND IN 2025**

Sonny Dykes and his Horned Frogs were 8–11 overall and 4–8 in Big 12 play between the Fiesta Bowl win over Michigan on New Year's Eve 2022 and an 11-point home loss to underdog Houston on Oct. 4 of last season. The defeat was the second home loss to an inferior conference opponent in three weeks.

The Cinderella run to the national championship game felt like a mirage — one of those blackout success stories like Frank the Tank in a debate competition against James Carville in Old School. Georgia turned the Horned Frogs back into a pumpkin, and TCU slipped back to Earth with a 5–7 record in 2023, becoming the first program since Texas in 2010 to miss a bowl game a year after playing in a national championship.

“We went from a five-win team in 2021 to a 13-win team our first year here in 2022 because of the roster,” Dykes said. “We had good players here and we were able to fill some gaps through the portal. We got our ass kicked the next year because seven guys left early for the NFL Draft, and that decimated our roster.”

Dykes believes the roster in Funky Town is the best he's ever coached. He says the fact that TCU only took 12 transfers is a sign of in-house development and a healthy roster. Quarterback Josh Hoover is back after finishing in the top 10 nationally in passing yards last year. Front-line guys on the roster include linebacker Namdi Obiazor, safety Bud Clark, defensive end Devean Deal, and wide receiver Eric McAlister.

But it isn't just the stars in Fort Worth shining bright. Dykes says this is his best roster because of the depth. He's typically entered seasons knowing 20 to 25 players weren't ready or able to give quality snaps on Saturdays. He feels differently about the 2025 roster. The transfer portal has allowed easier filtration, with players farther down the depth chart leaving for more playing time elsewhere, while TCU backfills with quality recruits and select transfers.

“I don't think there is a guy on our roster who can't play for us on Saturday,” Dykes said. “There are a couple of projects, sure, but those guys could play situationally for us this season. This is a deep team. A talented team. That doesn't always guarantee success, though.”

TCU was talented last year, too — more talented than UCF and Houston, for certain. But poor execution and a terrible turnover margin held the Frogs back early. They were minus-10 in turnover margin after six games, including a

minus-four in losses to SMU and Houston. An open week between Houston and a trip to Utah allowed the team to regroup.

“I just said, ‘Guys, let's stop beating ourselves and see if anyone else can beat us,’” Dykes said. “We were plus-four in turnover margin in our final seven games and won six of those. The one loss was by three points on the road. Turns out, we were pretty good when we weren't turning the ball over and forcing a few on defense.”

TCU is betting on continuity in a sport of constant change. The Frogs didn't splash in the portal—instead, they signed the top recruiting class in the Big 12. Offensive coordinator Kendal Briles is entering his third year calling plays, and Andy Avalos is in Year 2 as defensive coordinator. TCU returns 60% of its production from last year, 49th most in the FBS, per ESPN.

“This conference is crazy, and any team can win 10 or lose 10 games,” Dykes said. “But we like where we're at with our roster and staff. This group has big goals.”

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**Devean DEAL**

The Garland Naaman Forest product enjoyed a breakout 2024 season, notching 46 tackles, 5.5 sacks and 9.5 tackles for loss.

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THE OFFENSE

Quarterback Josh Hoover headlines an offense engineered by third-year play-caller Kendal Briles. Hoover (3,949 passing yards, 27 TDs, 11 INTs) ranked seventh in the FBS in passing yards and was top 20 nationally in most statistical passing categories.

Hoover missed last spring due to injury and entered 2022 as the backup. This is the first time Briles has Hoover healthy through an offseason, and the duo believes it'll help TCU start strong in 2025, compared to the 3-3 beginning to 2024.

"Those reps are a big deal with the guys we brought in, and I can already tell the difference with our comfortability," Hoover said in the spring. "Last year, we started to find some things in this offense that I did well and gave us some identity in the passing game. We'll build the offense around more of those things and find new ways to get guys open in Year 3."

The Horned Frogs added transfer wide receivers Jordan Dwyer (Idaho) and Joseph Manjack IV (Houston) to help replenish a room that lost Jack Bech, Savion Williams, and J.P. Richardson. Dwyer caught 78 passes for 1,192 yards and 12 touchdowns last year at Idaho and can play outside or in the slot. Briles called him a dangerous vertical threat. Manjack drew comparisons to Bech because the ball finds him in big moments.

The wide receiver the staff is most excited about is Eric McAlister. The Azle product carved a niche for himself in a crowded receiver room last year and is the expected WR1 in the 2025 TCU offense. Major Everhart, Jordyn Bailey, and true freshman Ed Small are names to know in the slot. DJ Rogers remains the expected starter at tight end, with Chase Curtis also in the mix.

The Frogs must improve a run game that ranked 113th nationally to compete for a Big 12 title and take pressure off Hoover. UTSA transfer Kevorian Barnes impressed once the pads came on in the spring. Redshirt freshman Nate Palmer, Trent Battle, and Jeremy Payne will all get carries.

"One of the things we did really well in 2022 was achieve balance with a strong run game, and I think that really helped us, especially in those close games and on the road," head coach Sonny Dykes said. "We want to get back to that. Balance doesn't have to be 50-50. It's about being able to do it when we need to."

An improved offensive line could also help TCU rediscover its mojo in the run game. Briles said the offseason emphasis up front was on physicality. Coltin Deery dropped 30 pounds and moved to center. Ryan Hughes and Ben Taylor-Whitfield figure to start at tackle. Carson Bruno missed the spring as he recovered from injury but is expected back to reclaim the right guard spot. At left guard, Cade Bennett returns from injury.

"We feel good with probably eight offensive linemen as we leave the spring, and that is a good number for us," Briles said. "We're pleased with our progression in terms of physicality, and we'll need that to be successful up front."

BY THE

NUMBERS

33.5 – The Horned Frogs scored nearly 34 points per game and sported the 23rd-best scoring offense in the country in Year 2 with Kendal Briles calling the plays.

303.8 – That's the average number of passing yards per game thrown by TCU quarterback Josh Hoover, which was sixth in the FBS and tops in Texas last year.

113.92 – The Frogs were 113th in rushing offense last year. They averaged over 190 rushing yards per game in the 2022 run to the CFP.

KEEP AN EYE ON

TCU has one of the best quarterback rooms in the Big 12 even after Hauss Hejny transferred to Oklahoma State after the season. Offensive coordinator Kendal Briles gushed over backup Ken Seals in the spring, describing the senior as "professional and mature" during the spring. The future of the quarterback position at TCU is incoming freshman Adam Schobel. The reigning Mr. Texas Football won a state championship at Columbus in December and enrolled at TCU in January. Briles said the strong-armed quarterback "has an incredible future" and was extremely accurate in his first spring on campus.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

WR JORDYN BAILEY

The Denton Ryan export was TCU's primary kickoff returner as a redshirt freshman and should see his role as a slot receiver increase this season. He caught nine passes and scored two total touchdowns last year while playing in 12 games. Bailey also rushed for 74 yards.

WR DOZIE EZUKANMA

The redshirt freshman from Keller Timber Creek received high praise from Dykes and Briles in the spring. He played in three games last year without logging a reception in a crowded wide receiver room. He could break out in his second season thanks to more opportunities.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#10 Josh
QB Hoover

6-2, 200, JR.
ROCKWALL

#17 Trent
RB Battle

6-1, 200, SR.
DAPHNE, ALA.

#88 Eric
WR McAlister

6-3, 205, SR.
AZLE

#7 Jordan
WR Dwyer

6-0, 195, JR.
PUYALLUP, WASH.

#14 Joseph
WR Manjack IV

6-3, 205, SR.
TOMBALL

#0 DJ
TE Rogers

6-4, 250, SR.
BELLEVUE, WASH.

#70 Ryan
LT Hughes

6-6, 290, R-FR.
THE WOODLANDS

#60 Cade
LG Bennett

6-3, 300, SR.
SCOTTSDALE, ARIZ.

#51 Coltin
C Deery

6-4, 325, SR.
GLEN MILLS, PENN.

#62 Carson
RG Bruno

6-4, 305, SR.
SHREVEPORT, LA.

#56 BenTaylor-
RT Whitfield

6-6, 315, JR.
DUNCANVILLE

#34 Kyle
K Lemmermann

6-2, 205, SO.
SOUTHLAKE

THE DEFENSE

Creating turnovers in the second half of the season helped the Horned Frogs win six of their last seven and head into 2025 with Big 12 championship aspirations. Second-year defensive coordinator Andy Avalos said the staff found better ways to emphasize and reward turnover creation in practice as the 2024 season rolled into October. The Frogs forced just four turnovers in their first six games, then created 12 in the final seven.

"There's always a fine line in improving takeaways without becoming a sloppy tackling team. A lot of times it can be one or the other," Avalos said. "We put in a quota at practice to take 40 shots on the ball and just made it part of what we do. It helped us last year, and we're ahead of where we were again during spring ball."

Devean Deal is the headliner on the edge of the TCU defense. He was the MVP of the bowl win over Louisiana and led the Frogs with 9.5 tackles for loss and 5.5 sacks. Deal recorded at least one TFL in six of the final seven games. The defensive end positions will be further bolstered when Michael Ibukun-Okeyode and Paul Oyewale return from injuries that ended their 2024 seasons. Avalos expects both back by summer.

Markis Deal, Devean's brother, is the anchor of the interior defensive line. He started seven games last year and will be a mainstay at nose guard. Avalos hopes to develop more depth behind him with Connor Lingren and Sterlin Brooks emerging. Washington State transfer Ansel Din-Mbuh exited spring as the expected starter at defensive tackle. Avalos called him "a huge addition to our team, not just on the field but as a leader and a worker."

Linebacker should again be a strength despite the loss of Johnny Hodges. Namdi Obiazor returns as the starter at Will linebacker, thanks to a JUCO ruling that granted him an extra year of eligibility. The former safety is still relatively new to the position, which has allowed him to keep developing even as he enters his sixth college season. Kaleb Elarms-Orr will start at Mike linebacker after splitting time with Hodges last year.

Cornerback, hit hard by injuries in 2024, should benefit from improved depth. Avery Helm and Vernon Glover were potential starters last year before injuries forced them out. They're back in 2025 and join Channing Canada and transfer Elijah Johnson to give Avalos four starting-caliber corners.

Bud Clark is one of the Big 12's most experienced safeties and returns at field safety. Jordan Lester is his backup. Jamel Johnson is emerging at boundary safety, with Kaden McFadden providing depth and top-end special teams play. Austin Jordan is expected to start at nickel, with LSU transfer Kylin Jackson also competing for snaps.

The Frogs added a pair of defenders through the spring portal window in safety Ryan Yaites (Cal) and linebacker Michael Teason (Missouri State). Even if neither break into the starting lineup by fall, they offer quality depth.

BY THE

NUMBERS

24.6 – That's the number of points allowed per game for Andy Avalos' group in his first year as defensive coordinator. That was 62nd in the country.

160.46 – The Frogs struggled to stop the run for much of the season, allowing over 160 yards per game. TCU checked in at 83rd nationally in rush defense.

43.72 – TCU was 104th in the country in third down conversions allowed at nearly 44 percent. No team in Texas allowed more.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Defensive lineman Zach Chapman transitioned from defensive tackle to defensive end in the offseason. Defensive coordinator Andy Avalos believes that better suits the 6-foot-5, 255-pound sophomore from Fort Bend Marshall. Chapman played in all 13 games and was tied for second on the team with three sacks. Chapman registered 24 tackles and a quarterback hurry and made at least one tackle in 11 of 13 contests. He was a second-team Freshman All-American by the Athletic and will be in the rotation at field-side defensive end. Chapman was a four-star recruit in high school.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

LB MAX CARROLL

The sophomore from Tennessee is expected to be the primary backup at Mike and Will linebacker. He recorded 20 tackles, including one tackle for loss, and two pass breakups in 13 games as a redshirt freshman. He was a four-star recruit in the 2023 class.

CB VERNON GLOVER

The 6-1, 205-pound sophomore from Dickinson was pegged as a potential starter heading into 2024 before suffering a season-ending injury in fall camp. He'll compete with Avery Helm, Channing Canada, and Elijah Jackson for playing time. Glover was a three-star recruit and played in 10 games back in 2023.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#42 Zachary
DE Chapman

6-5, 255, SO.
FORT BEND

#95 Markis
NT Deal

6-5, 325, SO.
GARLAND

#92 Ansel
DT Din-Mbuh

6-3, 291, JR.
ALEDO

#11 Devean
STUD Deal

6-4, 250, SR.
GARLAND

#4 Namdi
WLB Obiazor

6-3, 220, SR.
EDEN PRAIRIE, MINN.

#3 Kaleb
MLB Elarms-Orr

6-2, 235, SR.
HAYWARD, CALIF.

#14 Austin
NB Jordan

6-0, 200, SR.
DENTON

#7 Channing
CB Canada

6-1, 185, SR.
BOULTE, LA.

#25 Elijah
CB Jackson

6-1, 193, SR.
CARSON, CALIF.

#21 Bud
FS Clark

6-2, 185, SR.
ALEXANDRIA, LA.

#2 Jamel
SS Johnson

6-1, 200, JR.
ARLINGTON

#31 Ethan
P Craw

6-3, 220, SR.
TASMANIA, AUSTRALIA

TCU

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BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS
FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

"This is a pivotal year for that staff. They had that great first year with Patterson's guys and then about .500 in conference after that. Year 3 of (Kendal) Briles and Year 2 with (Andy Avalos), it's a pivotal year. They had been really heavy transfer, but I thought they went heavy with high school recruiting last year. That was a pivot. That was interesting."

"TCU is a talented football team that can be a little bit hot and cold the last two seasons. At their best, one of the scariest teams on our schedule. They look the part in warmups, that's for sure. Sonny has always found athletes. I really like what that defensive coordinator does."

"They could win the Big 12 or miss a bowl and neither would shock me. Some of that is the Big 12. Feels like Baylor in that the good is real good and the bad is real bad."

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TCU HORNED FROGS

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Eric McALISTER

Photo Credit: Ron Jenkins/Getty Images

Where Legends Begin

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Sept. 1	at North Carolina	W	Oct. 25	at West Virginia	W
Sept. 13	ABILENE CHRISTIAN	W	Nov. 8	IOWA STATE	W
Sept. 20	SMU	W	Nov. 15	at BYU	L
Sept. 26	at Arizona State	L	Nov. 22	at Houston	W
Oct. 4	COLORADO	W	Nov. 29	CINCINNATI	W
Oct. 11	at Kansas State	L			
Oct. 18	BAYLOR	L			

Record: 8-4 (5-4)

BIGGEST GAME — SEPT. 20 VS SMU

The final scheduled installment of the Iron Skillet is crucial for the Horned Frogs after TCU was embarrassed while giving up 66 points in a loss last year against SMU. Head coach Sonny Dykes was ejected during the blowout loss in front of a rabid SMU crowd.

TRAP GAME — OCT. 25 AT WEST VIRGINIA

TCU begins a six-game stretch without an open date on Sept. 20 that will dictate the outcome of its season. That journey includes games against Big 12 contenders Arizona State, Kansas State, and Baylor. It concludes with a trip to West Virginia against Rich Rodriguez's Mountaineers.

UPSET GAME — OCT. 11 AT KANSAS STATE

TCU won't be heavy underdogs against any of its 2025 opponents, but Big 12 road games against fellow contenders Arizona State and Kansas State provide the Horned Frogs a chance to leap into the top of the league by mid-October. Run-heavy teams like Kansas State hurt TCU last year.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING: 11-1

The Horned Frogs are as talented as any team in the Big 12 if the offense provides quarterback Josh Hoover with a ground game and the defense improves against the run in Year 2 under defensive coordinator Andy Avalos. Arizona State and Kansas State are the toughest tests outside of Fort Worth.

FLOOR: 5-7

The margins are razor thin in a crowded Big 12. The home slate includes tough tests against SMU, Colorado, Baylor, and Iowa State. Trips to Arizona State and Kansas State are mixed into the meat of the schedule. Continued trouble to run the ball and stop the run could plague the Horned Frogs.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 30	at Stanford	W, 34-27	Oct. 26	Texas Tech	W, 35-34
Sept. 7	Long Island	W, 45-0	Nov. 2	at Baylor	L, 37-34
Sept. 14	UCF	L, 35-34	Nov. 9	Oklahoma State	W, 38-13
Sept. 21	at SMU	L, 66-42	Nov. 23	Arizona	W, 49-28
Sept. 28	at Kansas	W, 38-27	Nov. 30	at Cincinnati	W, 20-13
Oct. 4	Houston	L, 30-19	Dec. 28	Louisiana (Bowl)	W, 34-3
Oct. 19	at Utah	W, 13-7			

Record: 9-4 (6-3)

RECRUITING BREAKDOWN

Three GEMS

ADAM SCHOBEL

A legacy quarterback and four-year varsity starter, Schobel helped lead Columbus to a state title while improving each season. He's accurate, smart, and capable of making off-platform throws. With NFL bloodlines and big-game poise, Schobel's ceiling is high—and his arrival continues a strong Horned Frog tradition.

ED SMALL

A true Swiss Army knife at wide receiver. He can take the top off, work the middle, or score on jet sweeps. What sets him apart is his toughness and IQ—he understands spacing, catches everything, and wins in multiple ways. Expect him to thrive with an eye on cracking into the 2025 rotation.

CHAD WOODFORK

With the size to defend the run and the burst to pressure quarterbacks, Woodfork is the perfect edge rusher for TCU's defense. His combination of strength and speed gives him the ability to disrupt plays from day one, and he's expected to be a key player for the Horned Frogs in short order.



Jon DENMAN

Photo Credit: Greg Powers

the EXPERT'S TAKE

RECRUITING
GRADE

B+

DCTF RECRUITING ANALYST GREG POWERS

TCU made a major investment in high school recruiting with its 2025 class, signing 30 prep prospects to build on the 20 it added in 2024. That's 50 high school signees over two cycles — a strong foundation for long-term roster development. The Horned Frogs stayed true to their Texas roots, landing 21 of those 30 from in-state programs. That kind of local focus should resonate with fans who take pride in keeping top talent home. The class is balanced across positions and includes several high-ceiling prospects who project as future pros, offering a mix of immediate depth and long-range potential.

2025 RECRUITING CLASS

HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE (247Sports Rank: 32th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Keylan Abrams	Edge	6-0	195	DeSoto
Joseph Albright	DB	5-10	160	Spring Westfield
Dillon Arkansas	LB	6-1	190	Denton Ryan
Perry Cole	DL	6-3	290	Palestine
Kollin Collier	DB	6-0	185	Hutchinson CC (KS)
Jon Denman	RB	5-10	195	Palestine
Floyd Guidry	DL	6-0	285	Spring
Sam Haley	LB	6-3	220	Ensworth (TN)
Jacobe Hayes	WR	5-10	170	Mansfield
Gil Jackson	DB	6-2	185	Fort Bend Ridge Point
Cameron Jamerson	ATH	6-0	170	Shadow Creek
Dane Jones	WR	5-11	170	Fort Bend Ridge Point
Jackson Jones	OL	6-7	290	Pine (LA)
Jared Martin	Edge	6-3	210	Central (CA)
Jonah Martinez	DB	6-1	180	Long Beach City College (CA)
Kelten Mickell	DL	6-2	300	Jones College (MS)
Mason Peterson	TE	6-4	220	Dickinson
Kilian Registe	OL	6-5	300	Keller
Blake Robinett	DL	6-3	285	Fort Worth All Saints
Adam Schobel	QB	6-4	190	Columbus
John Schobel	Edge	6-4	215	Columbus
Logan Schram	OL	6-6	330	Boerne
Terry Shelton	WR	6-4	200	Carrollton Ranchview
Julius Simms	DB	6-2	190	Whitehouse
Ed Small	WR	5-11	205	Austin Anderson
Micah Strickland	DB	6-0	175	Brownshoro
Witten Van Hoy	OL	6-7	305	Benton (LA)
Brody Whatley	DL	6-4	265	Neville (LA)
Anthony Williams	LB	6-3	190	Shadow Creek
Chad Woodfork	Edge	6-4	220	Summer Creek

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 53rd)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Kevorian Barnes	RB	5-9	210	UTSA
Ansel Din-Mbuh	DL	6-3	290	Washington State
Jordan Dwyer	WR	6-0	195	Idaho
Will Halkyard	LS	6-3	225	Northwestern
Elijah Jackson	CB	6-1	195	Washington
Kylin Jackson	S	6-3	200	LSU
Rasheed Jackson	OT	6-7	320	UIW
Dylan Kinney	OL	6-3	310	Abilene Christian
Joseph Manjack IV	WR	6-3	205	Houston
Ka'Morreun Pimpton	TE	6-6	240	LSU
Michael Teason	LB	6-2	215	Missouri State
Ryan Yaites	S	6-1	200	Cal

UNDER THE RADAR

JON DENMAN

Denman might have flown under the national radar, but those in Texas are aware of his unique blend of speed and strength. With a 300-pound bench press and a sub-11-second 100-meter time, he brings the physicality and athleticism TCU needs. His balance and vision make him a prime candidate for early snaps.

DC
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TEXAS FOOTBALL

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TCU HORNED FROGS



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**BY MIKE CRAVEN****RED RAIDERS GO ALL-IN ON
ROSTER, STAFF, AND FACILITIES**

The oil and gas that define West Texas are fueling Texas Tech's quest for a Big 12 championship and a berth in the College Football Playoff. Mega-boosters Cody Campbell and John Sellers challenged the Red Raider brass to go all-in after last season and ahead of the court ruling to enact revenue sharing for college athletics.

Texas Tech beat both teams in last year's Big 12 championship. And while close only counts with horseshoes and hand grenades, those results did create the confidence to bet the farm. Head coach Joey McGuire and general manager James Blanchard, who turned down a job at Notre Dame in the offseason, were given a blank check and a mission: be in the market for every star in the portal.

"We're so lucky to have the boosters that we have, and that starts with Cody Campbell, who is a forward thinker and knew that there was a window before this revenue sharing takes effect that allowed us to go all-in this offseason," McGuire said. "Why wouldn't we try to take advantage of the two worlds we're currently living in with NIL and revenue sharing?"

Texas Tech signed the top transfer class in the country with 21 new additions as of the end of April. Thirteen of those 21 were considered four-star transfers by 247Sports, the most in the country. The Red Raiders added five new defensive linemen and five new defensive backs among the haul.

The headliners include defensive tackle Lee Hunter, defensive end David Bailey, and safety Cole Wisniewski on the defensive side of the ball. Offensive linemen Howard Sampson, Will Jados, and Hunter Zambrano were the most important signings on offense.

The new investments weren't restricted to the roster. McGuire hired offensive coordinator Mack Leftwich away from Texas State after Zach Kittley became the head coach at FAU. He then hired Shiel Wood away from Houston to replace Tim DeRuyter. Texas Tech also revealed facility upgrades to the tune of \$242 million.

The resources at McGuire's disposal create new expectations for a program without a ton of championship history. The last time Texas Tech won a conference championship was in 1976. Bill Parcells was the defensive coordinator. The only 10-plus-win season since that run was in 2008. McGuire led Texas Tech to eight wins in two of his first three seasons. The last time the Red Raiders won more than that was in 2009, the last year Mike Leach was on campus. That was also the last year Tech finished the season with a winning record in conference play before McGuire arrived.

The ceiling is now the floor, as the program can finally recruit against the big boys of college football. McGuire doesn't call it pressure, however. He sees it as an opportunity.

"We have a chance to go out and do something that hasn't been done in a long time here at Texas Tech," McGuire said. "That doesn't make me nervous, that makes me excited."

McGuire still considers himself a high school coach at heart. Culture remains important to him — maybe more important than ever—in the transfer portal era. Football is the ultimate team sport, and it isn't always won by the teams with the most talented individuals. Arizona State was picked to finish last in the Big 12 last year before winning it and reaching the College Football Playoff. Tech knows a talented roster isn't the only ingredient required to win big.

Because of that, McGuire took on a bigger role recruiting high school talent on the road this offseason so his new coordinators could stay in Lubbock and build chemistry with units breaking in new faces in fresh schemes. Blanchard also remained local to help facilitate those connections.

"Relationships are still the most important thing, and I thought it'd be best if (the new coordinators) were in the building with our guys," McGuire said. "I think that'll help us start fast."

Texas Tech saw what SMU did in Year 1 in the ACC and what Arizona State did as new members of the Big 12 and pushed all its chips into the middle of the table ahead of the 2025 season. The Red Raiders signed one of the top portal classes in America loaded with offensive and defensive linemen.

Behren Morton is back to lead an offense that must replace Tahj Brooks, the program's all-time leading rusher. Mack Leftwich takes over at offensive coordinator and Shiel Wood was hired away from Houston to lead a Red Raider defense that underperformed in 2024.

5

**Caleb DOUGLAS**

The Red Raiders' big-play merchant, Douglas returns to Lubbock after leading the team with 14.6 yards per catch.

Photo Credit: John E. Moore III/Getty Images

THE OFFENSE

The Air Raid offense is as synonymous with West Texas as oil and gas. Former Texas State offensive coordinator Mack Leftwich takes over play-calling duties for the Red Raiders after Zach Kittley accepted the head coaching job at FAU. He comes from the Eric Morris tree, a protégé of former Texas Tech head coach Mike Leach.

"I haven't strayed too far from those concepts, so I think the average fan watching on a Saturday will recognize a lot of similarities between what I do and what's been done here in the past," Leftwich said. "We want to lean into the history and tradition of offensive football at Tech and let our guys know that's the expectation."

Leftwich runs an offense based on tempo and physicality. He keeps things simple so the group can play fast. The run game — underappreciated in his Air Raid background — was a key piece of Texas State's success, where his Bobcats led all Texas FBS programs in rushing yards per game last season. Explosive plays are also a focal point, something head coach Joey McGuire emphasized in the hiring process.

"We talk a lot about scoring from far," Leftwich said. "I'm a better play caller when we score from the 50 than when we need eight plays in the red zone. Those 12-, 13-play drives are hard to sustain against good defenses."

The offense in 2025 starts with quarterback Behren Morton (3,335 passing yards, 27 TDs, 8 INTs), who missed his second straight spring with a shoulder injury. He resumed throwing in mid-May after rehabbing a Grade 5 AC joint sprain. Redshirt freshman Will Hammond is the backup and future of the position.

Caleb Douglas (60 catches, 877 yards, 6 TD) and Coy Eakin (49 catches, 652 yards, 7 TD) return at wide receiver. The Red Raiders bolstered the wide receiver room with portal additions Reggie Virgil, Roy Alexander, and the return of Micah Hudson. Virgil arrived ahead of spring practice and was a big play weapon at Miami (OH) with nine touchdown catches and six plays of 40 or more yards. Returner John Carlos Miller II and Louisiana transfer Terrance Carter Jr. give Leftwich the ability to utilize two-tight end sets for the first time in his career.

Replacing Tahj Brooks' production will require a committee. USC transfer Quinten Joyner, a Manor alum like Brooks, averaged 7.6 yards on 63 carries last year. J'Koby Williams and Cam Dickey will also factor into the backfield.

McGuire used his war chest to upgrade the trenches, adding four key transfers on the offensive line. North Carolina transfer Howard Sampson, who began at North Texas, will start at left tackle. Will Jados (Maryland) and Hunter Zambrano (Illinois State) can play tackle or guard. Colorado's Cash Cleveland was added after spring ball.

Tech feels confident in the interior line with Sheridan Wilson returning at center and Davion Carter at guard. A healthy Vinny Sciury adds another option.

BY THE NUMBERS

37.6 – Texas Tech was fourth in the country in scoring offense last year, trailing only Miami, Indiana, and Ole Miss. Offensive coordinator Zach Kittley is the head coach at FAU now.

136.82 – That's how many rushing yards per game Tahj Brooks accounted for in his final season as a Red Raider. He left as the program's all-time leading rusher.

296.7 – Texas Tech lived up to its reputation by ranking in the top 10 in passing yards per game.

KEEP AN EYE ON

The transfer portal helped Texas Tech reinforce depth at the wide receiver position with a trio of additions. One is a familiar face in former five-star signee Micah Hudson, who transferred to Texas A&M and back to Texas Tech since the end of the 2024 season. He was the highest-rated signing in program history but only managed eight catches as a true freshman as he overcame nagging injuries. The Red Raiders also added Incarnate Word's Roy Alexander and Maryland's Reggie Virgil. Alexander was a spring addition who should help Texas Tech in the slot.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

TE TERRANCE CARTER JR.

The Killeen native returns to the Lone Star State after spending three seasons at Louisiana where he played 26 games and made 15 starts for the Ragin' Cajuns. Carter arrives in Lubbock with 76 career receptions for 944 yards and seven scores.

RB J'KOBY WILLIAMS

Replacing running back Tahj Brooks will take multiple Red Raiders and Williams ran the ball 21 times for 93 yards and a touchdown as a freshman last year. He'll be in the mix with USC transfer Quinten Joyner and fellow sophomore Cameron Dickey.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#2 Behren QB Morton 6-2, 220, SR. EASTLAND	#0 Quinten RB Joyner 5-11, 205, SO. MANOR	#8 Coy WR Eakin 6-2, 210, JR. STEPHENVILLE	#5 Caleb WR Douglas 6-4, 210, SR. FORT BEND HIGHTOWER
#1 Reggie WR Virgil 6-3, 190, SR. APOPKA, FLA.	#9 John Carlos WR Miller 6-5, 245, SR. GREENSBORO, N.C.	#79 Howard LT Sampson 6-8, 340, JR. HUMBLE	#76 Will LG Jados 6-7, 310, SR. WESTERVILLE, OHIO
#72 Sheridan C Wilson 6-5, 300, JR. ARGYLE	#56 Davion RG Carter 6-0, 295, SR. PEARL, MISS.	#57 Hunter RT Zambrano 6-5, 305, SR. WESTON, FLA.	#27 Upton K Bellenfant 6-1, 185, SR. MURFREESBORO, TENN.

THE DEFENSE

Texas Tech head coach Joey McGuire made a change at defensive coordinator after the Red Raiders finished 122nd in scoring defense, allowing 34.8 points per game. He hired Shiel Wood away from Houston to replace Tim DeRuyter. But coaching wasn't the only issue — Tech also added five new defensive linemen and five new defensive backs through the transfer portal.

"Our first goals are to stop the run and not give up explosive plays," Wood said. "Our job is to get offenses off-schedule so we have the advantage and can start dictating things. If they're going to score, we want to make them go 10 or 11 plays to do it."

Tech allowed 4.46 yards per carry and 28 rushing touchdowns last year. Lee Hunter (UCF), Skyler Gill-Howard (NIU), and Anthony Holmes Jr. (Houston) were brought in to shore up the interior defensive line. Hunter, listed at 6-4 and 325 pounds, will start at nose tackle. He was a second-team All-Big 12 selection in 2024 after recording 9.5 tackles for loss and 27 total pressures. Gill-Howard and Holmes can play beside him. Holmes was one of the top performers in Wood's Houston defense.

The edge was also fortified with transfers Romello Height (Georgia Tech) and David Bailey (Stanford). Height led Georgia Tech with 6.5 tackles for loss. Bailey, a spring addition, led Stanford in TFLs (8), hurries (8), sacks (7), and forced fumbles (5) last year.

"We knew we had to get better up front to compete for a Big 12 championship," McGuire said. "Those guys have looked great this spring. They hit the ground running."

Tech added new faces to the secondary as well. Brice Pollack (Mississippi State) has potential as a lockdown corner and drew rave reviews from McGuire and Wood. UTEP's Amier Boyd-Matthews, Tarrion Grant (Purdue), and Dontae Balfour (Charlotte) will compete for playing time alongside returning starter Mo Horn.

North Dakota State transfer Cole Wisniewski is an immediate upgrade at strong safety. The 6-4, 220-pounder began as a linebacker before transitioning to safety. He was a first-team FCS All-American in 2023, leading all Division I players with eight interceptions. He missed last season due to foot surgery. Chapman Lewis returns at free safety. A.J. McCarty and Brenden Jordan are in the mix at nickel.

While the line and secondary are filled with newcomers, Red Raider fans know the linebackers. Jacob Rodriguez (127 tackles) ranked seventh nationally last year and will start at Will. Ben Roberts returns at Mike linebacker for his third year as a starter. Backup John Curry earned spring praise and should see snaps, along with Bryce Ramirez.

Where Legends Begin

BY THE

NUMBERS

34.8 – That's the average points per game allowed by the Texas Tech defense last year, 122nd-worst in America. That's why the Red Raiders have a new defensive coordinator.

1.62 – The Red Raiders failed to negatively impact opposing quarterbacks while ranking 100th in the FBS in sacks per game. Tech also struggled with that in 2023.

127 – Jacob Rodriguez returns at middle linebacker after posting the seventh-most tackles in the FBS last year as a junior.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Sometimes lost in the hype of amongst the new prize possessions along the Texas Tech defensive line is sophomore Brayton Rigsby. The Woodville native saw action in 12 of 13 games last year with one start, which came in non-conference play against North Texas. Rigsby exited spring as the expected starter at the field-side defensive end position, which is mostly a C-gap player in Shiel Wood's defense. Rigsby recorded 18 tackles last year, including three for loss. Thirteen of those 18 stops came in the final month of the season or in the bowl game versus Arkansas.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

DT ANTHONY HOLMES JR.

The 6-3, 300-pounder followed defensive coordinator Shiel Wood from Houston to Texas Tech in the offseason. Holmes started all 12 games for the Cougars last year and comes from a Spring Westfield program that produced NFL defensive tackles Ed Oliver and Keondre Coburn. He played 639 snaps last year.

DB DONTAE BALFOUR

The Red Raiders dipped into the transfer portal for a few playmakers to help retool a secondary that struggled in 2024. Balfour was a third-team All-AAC selection as a cornerback at Charlotte last year. He can also play safety. Balfour began his career at North Carolina.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#94 Brayton
DE Rigsby

6-2, 275, SO.
WOODVILLE

#2 Lee
NT Hunter

6-4, 325, SR.
MOBILE, ALA.

#0 Skyler
DT Gill-Howard

6-1, 290, SR.
MILWAUKEE, WIS.

#31 David
EDGE Bailey

6-3, 250, SR.
IRVINE, CALIF.

#13 Ben
MLB Roberts

6-3, 235, JR.
EATON

#10 Jacob
WLB Rodriguez

6-1, 230, SR.
WICHITA FALLS RIDER

#1 A.J.
NB McCarty

6-0, 195, SR.
BROWNWOOD

#19 Brice
CB Pollack

6-0, 195, JR.
SNELLVILLE, GA.

#4 Maurion
CB Horn

5-11, 190, JR.
BROKEN ARROW, OKLA.

#25 Crosby
FS Snowden

6-1, 180, JR.
BURLESON CENTENNIAL

#5 Cole
SS Wisniewski

6-4, 220, SR.
SPARTA, WIS.

#41 Jack
P Burgess

6-3, 215, SR.
BACCHUS MARSH, AUSTRALIA

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Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
TEXAS TECH RED RAIDERS

SCHEDULE & PREDICTIONS

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS
FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

“All the transfers have given them a bunch of hype but it’s been a bunch of hype for three or four years now. They’ve had hype in recruiting the last few cycles but I’m not sure those guys have been developed if they need more than a dozen transfers. What does that say?”

“The good news for Joey (McGuire) and those guys is that they had an unlimited budget and now that roster can go compete for a Big 12 title. The bad news, at least if they don’t make it to Arlington, is that billionaires aren’t typically known for patience on their return on investment.”

“Both of those new coordinators are top shelf. Great hires. But I don’t think coaching was the problem with that defense last year. Personnel was a bigger issue. It looks like they fixed that, too.”



Jacob RODRIGUEZ

Photo Credit: John E. Moore III/Getty Images

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 30	ARKANSAS PINE-BLUFF	W	Oct. 25	OKLAHOMA STATE	W
Sept. 6	KENT STATE	W	Nov. 1	at Kansas State	L
Sept. 13	OREGON STATE	W	Nov. 8	BYU	L
Sept. 20	at Utah	W	Nov. 15	UCF	W
Oct. 4	at Houston	W	Nov. 29	at West Virginia	W
Oct. 11	KANSAS	W			
Oct. 18	at Arizona State	L			

Record: 9-3 (6-3)

BIGGEST GAME — OCT. 18 AT ARIZONA STATE

The Red Raiders will likely be favored in their first six games of the season. The first time Joey McGuire’s team could be an underdog is in a mid-October trip to Arizona State to face the defending Big 12 champions – a team that Texas Tech beat at home last year.

TRAP GAME — SEPT. 20 AT UTAH

Texas Tech is 6-10 in true road games through three years of the Joey McGuire tenure. The first trip outside of Lubbock for his Red Raiders in 2025 is to Utah in Week 4. The Utes should return to form after a disappointing Year 1 as a Big 12 squad.

UPSET GAME — NOV. 1 AT KANSAS STATE

Texas Tech lost by nine points the last time the Red Raiders traveled to Manhattan, Kansas, to face the Wildcats. Beating a physical squad away from Jones AT&T Stadium has proven difficult for Texas Tech over the last few years. Joey McGuire is 0-2 versus Kansas State as a head coach.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING: 11-1

Texas Tech will be favored in at least 10 of its 12 games in 2025, including the first six. Road games at Arizona State and Kansas State are the tallest hurdles, at least on paper. No TCU or Baylor provide a solid road map for the Red Raiders to reach AT&T Stadium to play in the Big 12 championship.

FLOOR: 8-4

The roster talent and soft schedule should prevent the Red Raiders from dipping below eight wins. But four losses would feel like a massive disappointment after the offseason investment in the transfer portal and on a coaching staff that hired a new offensive and defensive coordinator and fought off Notre Dame for its general manager.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 31	Abilene Christian	W, 52-51 (OT)	Oct. 26	at TCU	L, 35-34
Sept. 7	at Washington State	L, 37-16	Nov. 2	at Iowa State	W, 23-22
Sept. 14	North Texas	W, 66-21	Nov. 9	Colorado	L, 41-27
Sept. 21	Arizona State	W, 30-22	Nov. 23	at Oklahoma State	W, 56-48
Sept. 28	Cincinnati	W, 44-41	Nov. 30	West Virginia	W, 52-15
Oct. 5	at Arizona	W, 28-22	Dec. 27	Arkansas (Liberty Bowl)	L, 39-26
Oct. 19	Baylor	L, 59-35			

Record: 8-5 (6-3)

DC
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David Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
TEXAS TECH RED RAIDERS

Three GEMS

QB LLOYD JONES

Jones is a dynamic dual-threat QB with elite multi-sport credentials and state-champion pedigree. Despite an ACL injury in 2024, he enrolled early and is progressing well. His natural arm strength and off-script creativity give him exciting upside in Tech's offense—especially with time to develop behind a deep quarterback room.

OL CONNOR CARTY

Carty, a late flip from Texas A&M, adds a physical and polished presence to Tech's offensive front. His mobility and strength in the run game make him a natural fit at guard or center. A glue guy with leadership skills, he could be an early contributor on the interior line.

WR TRISTAN GENTRY

Gentry is a big-play slot weapon with the quickness to shake defenders and the speed to break away. His versatility and ability in the return game make him a field position-changer. A creative offense like Tech's should unlock his potential, especially on third downs and special teams.



Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
TEXAS TECH RED RAIDERS



Photo Credit: Paul Roberts

RECRUITING BREAKDOWN

the EXPERT'S TAKE

RECRUITING
GRADE

A

DCTF RECRUITING ANALYST GREG POWERS

Recruiting momentum remains strong in Lubbock under Joey McGuire, with Texas Tech finishing inside the national top 30 for the second straight year. The Red Raiders continue to build with purpose, powered by General Manager James Blanchard, who turned down a major offer from Notre Dame to stay put. While Texas remains the primary focus, the 2025 class showed a willingness to expand the map—signing high-upside prospects from overlooked regions like Oklahoma, South Dakota, Nebraska and Michigan. If those evaluations hit, Tech could have struck gold in Big Ten country. This class proves the Red Raiders are thinking big and recruiting smart.

2024 RECRUITING CLASS

HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE (247Sports Rank: 22nd)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Ren Brown	OL	6-5	295	Stanton (Neb.)
Connor Carty	OL	6-4	290	Prosper
Michael Dever	WR	5-11	170	Lubbock-Cooper
Tristian Gentry	WR	5-11	165	Stephenville
Elias Gillen	OL	6-5	295	Stevens (S.C.)
Brock Golwas	LB	6-1	215	Flower Mound Marcus
Danilo Guberinich	OL	6-5	280	Catholic Central (Mich.)
Preztynn Harrison	TE	6-4	220	Mineral Wells
Michael Henderson	DB	5-9	170	Wylie East
Bryson Jones	WR	6-1	175	Frisco Lone Star
Lloyd Jones	QB	6-2	210	Hitchcock
Deante Lindsay	DB	6-1	165	Ada (Okla.)
Garin Maley	OL	6-5	260	Papillion-La Vista
Braylan McDonald	DB	5-11	185	Lancaster
Patrick McMath	OL	6-4	255	Katy
Sean Robinson	ATH	6-3	205	Cibolo Steele
Dylan Singleton	DL	6-3	295	Loreauville (La.)
Leyton Stone	WR	6-2	175	Wolfforth Frenship

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 2nd)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Roy Alexander	WR	5-10	200	UIW
David Bailey	Edge	6-3	250	Stanford
Dontae Balfour	CB	6-2	180	Charlotte
Upton Bellenfant	K	6-2	180	Buffalo
Amier Boyd	CB	6-1	180	UTEP
Terrance Carter Jr.	TE	6-2	240	Louisiana
Cash Cleveland	OL	6-3	290	Colorado
Skyler Gill-Howard	DL	6-1	285	Northern Illinois
Tarrion Grant	CB	6-2	195	Purdue
Mitch Griffis	QB	5-11	195	Wake Forest
Romello Height	Edge	6-3	240	Georgia Tech
Anthony Holmes Jr.	DL	6-2	295	Houston
Micah Hudson	WR	6-0	195	Texas A&M
Lee Hunter	DL	6-4	320	UCF
Will Jados	OT	6-8	305	Maryland
Quinten Joyner	RB	5-11	215	USC
Brice Pollock	CB	6-1	190	Mississippi State
Howard Sampson	OT	6-8	325	North Carolina
Reggie Virgil	WR	6-4	190	Maryland
Cole Wisniewski	S	6-4	220	North Dakota State
Hunter Zambrano	IOL	6-5	300	Illinois State

UNDER THE RADAR

LB BROCK GOLWAS

Golwas is a tone-setting linebacker with sideline-to-sideline range and no-nonsense physicality. He was the emotional leader of Flower Mound Marcus' defense, and his toughness will resonate with fans in Lubbock. With special teams upside and an every-rep-is-war mentality, he's a future fan favorite and locker room cornerstone.

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BY CARTER YATES

ACC'S FUTURE: UNITED, UNEQUAL, AND STILL UNCERTAIN

Florida State and Clemson dropped their swords against the ACC this offseason in exchange for a new, unequal revenue distribution model that gives them what they believe they deserve: bigger payouts for a bigger brand.

From now on, 40% of ACC television money will be split evenly among the universities, and 60% will be chopped up proportionally based on TV ratings from the last five years.

There are two ways to look at this. Either the company line from commissioner Jim Phillips — that it “allow(s) us to focus on our collective future — including Clemson and Florida State — united in an 18-member conference.” Or that this is another decision to temporarily feed the hungry mouths who will one day leave for greener pastures anyway.

Crack open the college football history textbook and flip to the year 2007. The Big 12 once gave some schools more money than others. The top five were Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas A&M, and Nebraska. Four of those five teams eventually left for the SEC and Big Ten.

But who's to say what Florida State and Clemson will do? Here's a clue: they only agreed to the ACC's plan for a collective future and united front once the conference made it easier for schools to leave. The exit fee drops by \$18 million annually through 2029–30, then drops to \$75 million.

Did this deal save the ACC or simply delay the inevitable?

Speaking of inevitable, the rumors of **Clemson's (10-4, 7-1)** demise were greatly exaggerated. The Tigers won their eighth ACC Championship in a decade and now return the most production in the nation, per ESPN.

Cade Klubnik (3,639 passing yards, 36 passing touchdowns) played the best football of his career deep into the season. Three of his top receivers are back, including First-Team All-ACC pick Antonio Williams. The defense is just as loaded with defensive end TJ Parker (19.5 tackles for loss and 11.5 sacks) and cornerback Avieon Terrell, whose 13 pass breakups were the most by a Clemson player since 2014.

Clemson might've been the champ, but **SMU (11-3, 6-1)** was the biggest surprise. The Mustangs caught stray shots in Florida State's lawsuit for being invited to the ACC, then caught a College Football Playoff invite. Quarterback Kevin Jennings helped power the run (along with the ACC's No. 1-ranked scoring defense) after taking the starting role during the

team's bye week. He should benefit from RJ Maryland's return, who set the school's tight end record with 15 career touchdown catches before tearing his ACL in the Stanford game. Defensive coordinator Scott Symons will rely on All-ACC safety Isaiah Nwokobia as new faces shuffle along the defensive line.

The Mustangs aren't the only team ponying up, as **Miami (10-3, 6-2)** lured Georgia quarterback Carson Beck away from the NFL Draft for one final college season. Beck headlines the ACC's No. 1-ranked transfer class. Can the sixth-year senior return to his preseason Heisman finalist form, or will turnovers, like his eight interceptions in a three-game stretch, rear their ugly head again?

Miami spent its money on a quarterback, while **North Carolina (6-7, 3-5)** brought six-time Super Bowl champion Bill Belichick to Chapel Hill. Arguably the greatest NFL coach of all time, Belichick and general manager Michael Lombardi intend to remake UNC as the “33rd NFL team.”

There's little evidence of his hiring's pomp and circumstance during the Tar Heels' spring practice. Players did not have numbers on their practice jerseys. Instead of a spring game, Belichick had a “Practice Like a Pro” event.

Will Belichick implementing his Patriot Way in college football result in a rebuild of his New England machine? Or was that machine only ever as good as its most crucial part, quarterback Tom Brady? Belichick's record with Brady was

5 PLAYERS TO KNOW

CLEMSON WR BRYANT WESCO (MIDLOTHIAN)

The Freshman All-American combined with TJ Moore to become the first freshmen tandem in a Power Four conference since 2000 to each have 650 receiving yards and five touchdowns.

MIAMI C JAMES BROCKERMEYER (FW ALL SAINTS)

The All-Big 12 honorable mention selection from TCU should benefit from former offensive lineman Mario Crisotbal's coaching.

GEORGIA TECH QB HAYNES KING (LONGVIEW)

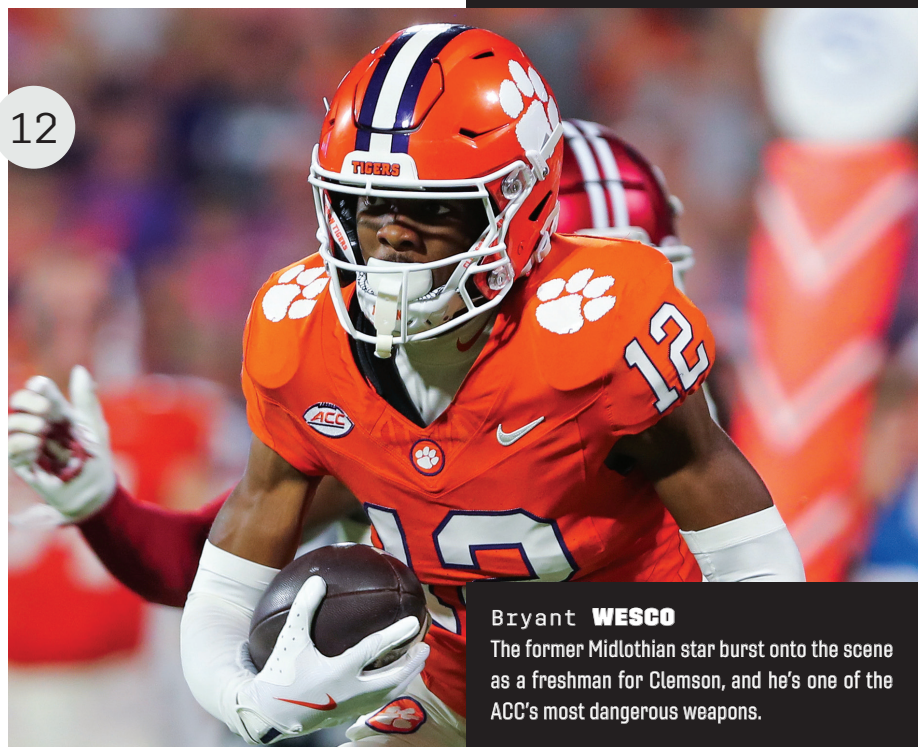
King has blossomed into one of the ACC's top dual-threat quarterbacks with 2,701 total yards and 25 touchdowns. He cut down his interceptions from 16 to two.

VIRGINIA TECH DE BEN BELL (CEDAR PARK)

In a unique move, Bell had six tackles for loss in four games at Texas State last season before opting out to preserve one season of eligibility.

DUKE DB CHANDLER RIVERS (BEAUMONT)

Rivers has developed from a three-star prospect to All-American entering his fourth season at Duke. Pro Football Focus ranked him the second-best cornerback in the nation.



Bryant **WESCO**

The former Midlothian star burst onto the scene as a freshman for Clemson, and he's one of the ACC's most dangerous weapons.

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Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
ACC

219-64 and 47-57 without. Of note: Brady is out of eligibility.

Keeping with glass half-full vs. half-empty arguments, **Florida State (2-10, 1-7)** feels like the nation's No. 7-ranked transfer portal class should lead a bounce-back. But the Seminoles also had the seventh-best portal class last offseason, which helped them win one FBS game.

Coach Mike Norvell is a general leading an army full of mercenaries. Florida State has ranked outside the top 10 in high school recruiting for the last five cycles, opting instead to stock up with one- to two-year rentals. It's a bold strategy, Cotton; let's see if it works out.

Here's another strategy — Jeff Brohm at **Louisville (9-4, 5-3)** dipped into the quarterback portal market for a third consecutive year to nab USC's Miller Moss. Running back Isaac Brown should be the offense's focal point, however, after becoming the first freshman in school history to rush for 1,000 yards in a season.

Georgia Tech's (7-6, 5-3) Brent Key is another head coach at his alma mater. A four-year starter at guard, Key has developed two of the ACC's more dominant linemen on both sides: First-Team guard Keylan Rutledge and Second-Team defensive tackle Jordan Van Den Berg.

NC State's (6-7, 3-5) Dave Doeren and **Pitt's (7-6, 3-5)** Pat Narduzzi are the ACC's two longest-tenured head coaches outside Clemson's Dabo Swinney. Both need a rebound to prove their reign hasn't stalled. Doeren, the winningest coach in Wolfpack history, suffered just his third losing season. Pitt, meanwhile, was the only Power Four team to go 0-6 from the eighth game onward.

It's bowl game or bust for **Virginia Tech's (6-7, 4-4)** Brent Pry and **Virginia's (5-7, 3-5)** Tony Elliott. Both will rely on former TXHSFB state champions at quarterback. Virginia Tech's Kyron Drones took a step back from a breakout 2023 season, missing four games with an injury. Virginia quarterback Chandler Morris led the American Athletic Conference in passing at North Texas last season.

Duke (9-4, 5-3) has a second-year coach whose team could be a sleeper ACC contender, while **Syracuse (10-3, 5-3)** and **Boston College (7-6, 4-4)** have second-year coaches whose programs are projected to take a step back in 2025. Defensive mastermind Manny Diaz's Duke defense brings back All-American cornerback Chandler Rivers, while the offense added Tulane transfer Darian Mensah at quarterback.

Fran Brown's 10-win season at Syracuse tied a program record for most by a first-year head coach. But the Orange ranks last in the ACC in returning production, headlined by tight end Oronde

Gadsden II and quarterback Kyle McCord's departures. Boston College lost its quarterback, Thomas Castellanos, even earlier than that, leaving mid-season after losing his starting job. Castellanos now plays at Florida State.

Wake Forest (4-8, 2-6) and **Stanford (3-9, 2-6)** have new head coaches with minimal expectations.

Wake Forest's Jake Dickert went 23-20 over three-and-a-half years at Washington State while navigating crazy conditions. He took over mid-year for a coach who declined to take the COVID vaccine and steered the program through the Pac-12's demise.

Stanford general manager Andrew Luck made the groundbreaking decision to fire head coach Troy Taylor for mistreating staffers, flexing that he is the top-down decision-maker of the football program — not the athletic director. Luck tabbed longtime NFL coach Frank Reich as the interim coach for 2025. In the meantime, he'll conduct a search for the full-time head coach in 2026 and beyond.

Cal (6-7, 2-6) donors threaten to yank away the purse until their program develops the same decision-making structure as Stanford. General manager Ron Rivera, the longtime NFL head coach, wants to be the shot-caller in all football operations. Considering Cal had to replace its entire offensive staff and then lost five running backs to the Transfer Portal in the spring window, he has a case.

OCTOBER 4:

FLORIDA STATE VS. MIAMI

A marquee brand matchup in the ACC opener reveals if Florida State's 2024 season was actually an aberration, or if the U stands for usurping.

OCTOBER 4:

NORTH CAROLINA VS. CLEMSON

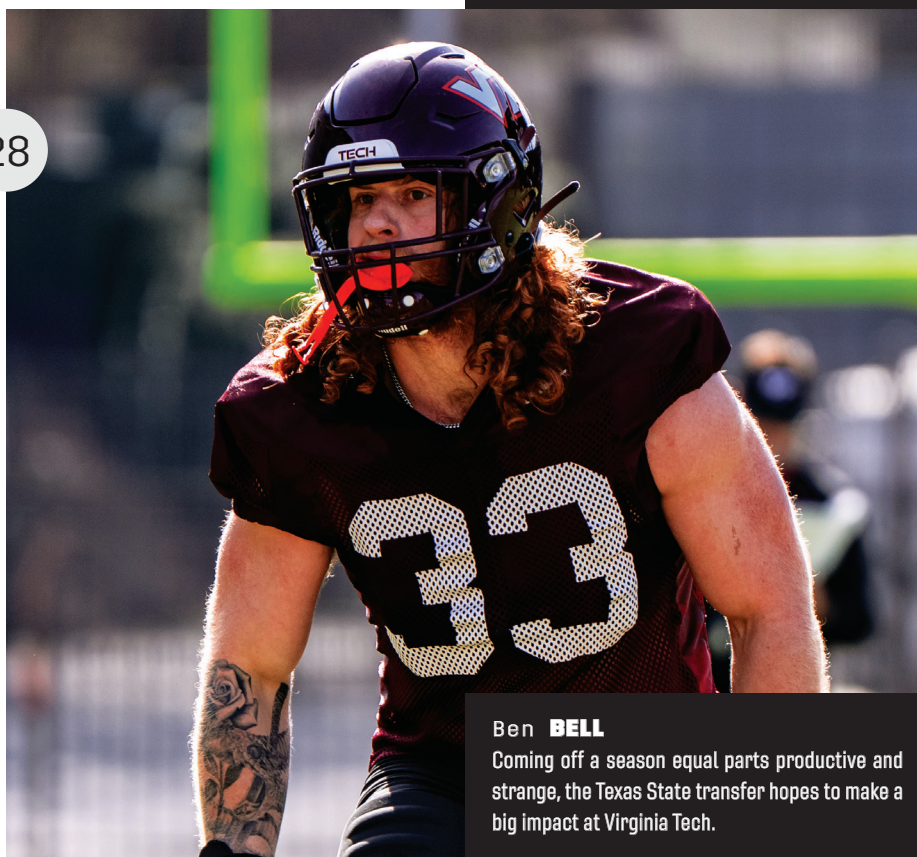
Bill Belichick opens ACC play against the class of the conference for over a decade. He may be the GOAT NFL coach, but Dabo Swinney runs this league.

OCTOBER 18:

SMU VS. CLEMSON

A rematch from last year's instant-classic ACC Championship game will prove whether SMU has staying power in the conference, or just had some beginner's luck.

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Ben **BELL**

Coming off a season equal parts productive and strange, the Texas State transfer hopes to make a big impact at Virginia Tech.

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TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
ACC



BY MIKE CRAVEN

**MUSTANGS READY TO PROVE
THEY BELONG AT THE BIG TABLE**

Rhett Lashlee won't call SMU's 2024 run a "dream season" because the Ponies lost their last two games — a last-minute defeat in the ACC Championship Game to Clemson and a sound loss at Penn State in the College Football Playoff.

Success is becoming the norm on the Hilltop after decades of purgatory. SMU has won 44 games and a conference title since the start of the decade. The program went 35 years between 10-win seasons after 1982 — they've now hit that mark two years in a row and three times in the last six seasons.

"First year in the ACC, reaching the ACC Championship Game, being in the CFP, it was awesome," Lashlee said. "Success is really hard to achieve, and having back-to-back 11-win seasons is tough. That's something that's never been done here."

The road to 10 wins and another ACC title game trip is tougher in 2025. No one will be caught sleeping on the Mustangs. They've proven they belong — now they must prove they can stay. The non-conference slate includes Baylor at home and a trip to TCU. The ACC schedule features a trip to Clemson and a home game against Miami, the 2025 conference favorites. SMU didn't face either during last year's regular season.

Lashlee and his staff spent the offseason fighting comfort. Last year's success will be remembered, but it means nothing to the 2025 version of the Ponies. This is a new team with new faces throughout the two-deep. SMU may have arrived, but it can't be satisfied.

"Sustaining success is hard when everyone tells you how good you are," Lashlee said. "As soon as you get comfortable, you stop progressing, stop developing, stop growing — personally and as a team."

SMU doesn't hide from the fact that 2024 was a turning point. Instant Power Four success raised the program's national profile — and local credibility in a pro sports-heavy Dallas market. The Mustangs weren't allowed a seat at the big table for decades. They bought their way in — and won right away.

Mention SMU to the average football fan over the past 40 years and "Death Penalty" might come up first. The Ponies hope their P4 rise and immediate success put that narrative in the rearview. Last season marked a new dawn — a chance to be known for on-field accomplishments instead of past transgressions that now seem tame in the NIL era.

"The standard of how we play football at SMU has been set," Lashlee said. "We have to keep chasing that. And the more we chase it, the higher the standard gets."

SMU doesn't plan to be a one-hit wonder. The roster talent has improved each season. Quarterback Kevin Jennings returns, as does tight end RJ Maryland, who missed the back half of 2024 with an injury. The offense should score. The defense must replace significant talent and production — a reset that Lashlee believes will help the new team refocus.

"This is a brand new team that hasn't accomplished anything yet," Lashlee said. "Hopefully that allows us to embrace expectations no one else put on us last year."

Can the Ponies avoid a sophomore slump in the Power Four? Replicating the magical run to the ACC championship and the College Football Playoff is a tough chore for SMU head coach Rhett Lashlee & Co. The schedule includes Clemson and Miami this year, and the non-conference slate involves games against Big 12 contenders Baylor and TCU.

Star quarterback Kevin Jennings and a few key offensive linemen do return for Lashlee's high-scoring attack. The loss of running back Brashard Smith is a concern. Safety Isaiah Nwokobia headlines Scott Symons' defense that must replace Elijah Roberts up front and linebackers Ahmad Walker and Kobe Wilson.

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RJ MARYLAND

After injury cut his junior season short, the star tight end is anxious for another chance to make an impact with the Mustangs.

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SMU MUSTANGS



TOUGH. disciplined. united.

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40 UNDER 40

D'ERIQ KING



THE OFFENSE

Kevin Jennings won his first nine games as SMU's starting quarterback last year, spearheading the Ponies' run to the ACC Championship and College Football Playoff in Year 1 as a Power Four program.

Jennings threw for 3,245 yards and accounted for 28 total touchdowns as a redshirt sophomore. Preston Stone, now at Northwestern, began last season as the starter before Jennings took over after the BYU loss. Jennings, who won a state title at South Oak Cliff, enters 2025 as the clear QB1 and is using the season-ending losses to Clemson and Penn State as fuel.

"I've added 11 or 12 pounds to increase my strength and durability," Jennings said. "On the field, I'm becoming calmer in the pocket and gaining confidence in those throws."

Jennings lost three of his top four receiving targets — Roderick Daniels Jr., Key'Shawn Smith, and Moochie Dixon. The biggest loss is running back Brashard Smith, who ran for 1,332 yards, caught 39 passes, and scored 18 total touchdowns.

The Mustangs are counting on Jordan Hudson (39 catches, 422 yards, 5 touchdowns) and Romello Brinson (13 catches, 135 yards) to be the 1-2 punch at wide receiver. Hudson, a highly regarded recruit, began his career at SMU. Brinson, a former Miami transfer, played only four regular-season games last year. The Ponies signed impact playmakers Jalen Cooper and Daylon Singleton in the 2025 class.

"It's the year for (Hudson and Brinson) to step up and reach their full potential," head coach Rhett Lashlee said. "If those two guys do that, we have a chance to be really good in the passing game."

The return of tight end RJ Maryland should bolster SMU's passing attack. He caught 24 passes for 359 yards and four touchdowns in seven games before a season-ending injury. He's the fastest pass catcher on the Hilltop and can play wide receiver, too. The emergence of former Michigan transfer Matthew Hibner (24 catches, 368 yards, 4 TDs) at tight end allows SMU to flex out Maryland or use two tight ends in a traditional set to create mismatches.

Expect a stable of players to help replace Smith's production at running back. Redshirt freshman Derrick McFall and Miami transfer Chris Johnson Jr. are the most likely to emerge as the bell cow. Freshman Dramekco Green didn't arrive until summer, but he could contribute.

SMU returns three starters on the offensive line, including both tackles. Savion Byrd and PJ Williams are proven commodities. Logan Parr is an all-conference performer at left guard. Arkansas transfer Addison Nichols will start at center. The question is at right guard: Joshua Bates and Nate Anderson are options, or Williams could move inside if Andrew Chamblee or Zion Nelson prove consistent at right tackle.

BY THE

NUMBERS

36.5 – SMU was seventh in the nation and tied for second in Texas with over 36 points scored per game in Year 1 as a Power Four program.

76 – That's the number of plays over 20-or-more yards for SMU last year, which was 10th-most in America.

319 – Only 11 teams recorded more first downs than the Ponies in 2024. They averaged 22.8 first downs per game.

KEEP AN EYE ON

SMU is thin at the wide receiver position and are counting on a few true freshmen to make an immediate impact in the passing game. Jordan Hudson is the only returning wide receiver who recorded at least 15 catches last year. Cibolo Steele product Jalen Cooper and DeSoto's Daylon Singleton were involved in spring practices as early enrollees and both impressed. Carterrious Brown (Arlington Seguin) and Isaiah Robertson (Arlington) arrived in the summer. Cooper was a four-star and a top 250 player in the 2025 recruiting cycle. Singleton was also a four-star recruit. Tight ends will figure heavily into the SMU passing attack.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

RB TJ HARDEN

SMU added the UCLA transfer to the running back room in the spring transfer window. He arrived in the summer to compete for snaps alongside Derrick McFall and Miami transfer Chris Johnson Jr. Harden led UCLA in rushing last year with 506 yards.

TE MATTHEW HIBNER

RJ Maryland receives most of the headlines at the tight end position at SMU but Hibner shouldn't go unnoticed. He's an old-school, physical tight end who can play with his hand in the dirt at 6-foot-5 and 251 pounds. Lashlee believes he's an NFL draft pick.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#7 Kevin
QB Jennings

6-0, 185, JR.
SOUTH OAK CLIFF

#0 Derrick
RB McFall

5-11, 183, RS-FR.
TYLER

#3 Romello
WR Brinson

6-2, 186, SR.
MIAMI, FLA.

#2 Jordan
WR Hudson

6-1, 191, SR.
GARLAND

#82 RJ
FLEX Maryland

6-4, 237, SR.
SOUTHLAKE CARROLL

#88 Matthew
TE Hibner

6-5, 251, SR.
BURKE, VA.

#54 Savion
LT Byrd

6-5, 304, SR.
DUNCANVILLE

#71 Logan
LG Parr

6-4, 316, SR.
SAN ANTONIO O'CONNOR

#63 Addison
C Nichols

6-5, 323, JR.
NORCROSS, GA.

#69 Nate
RG Anderson

6-4, 300, SR.
FRISCO REEDY

#59 PJ
RT Williams

6-5, 317, JR.
DICKINSON

#41 Collin
K Rogers

6-4, 219, SR.
PRATTVILLE, ALA.

THE DEFENSE

Defensive coordinator Scott Symons inherited an SMU defense that ranked 84th nationally in scoring defense after allowing 28.4 points per game in 2021. By 2024, the Mustangs were no longer a one-trick Pony that could score at will but couldn't stop a snuffle. They ranked 32nd in the FBS, allowing just 22.1 points per game during their run to the ACC title game and a spot in the College Football Playoff.

Symons remains, but much of the cast that helped transform SMU into one of the nation's top defenses is gone. The Mustangs rank 83rd in returning defensive production (51%). They lost stars like Elijah Roberts and Jared Harrison-Hunte on the defensive line, linebackers Ahmad Walker and Kobe Wilson, and multi-year starters in the secondary like Jonathan McGill and Cale Sanders Jr.

"We have a whole new defense, but it's our job as a staff and as players to get ready and meet the challenges ahead," Symons said. "We recruit these guys because we believe in them, and we'll find our best group and line it up from there."

Isaiah Smith and Cameron Robertson are the familiar faces at defensive end. The two combined for 15 tackles for loss and 10.5 sacks last season as reserves. Smith, a 2022 signee, has appeared in 40 games. Robertson transferred from North Texas in 2023 and has started twice in 28 appearances. SMU also added four edge rushers via the portal, including Trey Wilson (Baylor) and DJ Warner (Kansas).

The Mustangs reinforced the interior defensive line with four transfers. Jeffrey M'Ba (Purdue) and Terry Webb (Texas State) are expected starters at defensive tackle. SMU added William Spencer (Louisville) and Keveion'ta Spears (Memphis) in the spring, signaling a need for more trench depth.

Alexander Kilgore leads the linebacker unit in his third year on campus. East Carolina transfer Zakye Barker, a second-team All-AAC pick in 2023, totaled 86 tackles and a team-high 12 tackles for loss. Justin Medlock and Brandon Booker will compete with Barker for snaps alongside Kilgore.

Deuce Harmon returns to start at one cornerback spot. Safeties Isaiah Nwokobia and Ahmad Moses also return to anchor the secondary. Harmon started nine games last year and recorded eight pass breakups. Nwokobia and Moses combined for 173 tackles and six interceptions.

The other cornerback spot is a battle between Jaelyn Davis-Robinson and Syracuse transfer Marcellus Barnes Jr., who didn't participate in spring ball but arrived with high expectations. He was the only portal addition in the secondary this offseason. The starter at nickel remains undecided. The staff says multiple players are in the running, including Kyron Chambers, Jaden Milliner-Jones, and La'Modrick Spencer.

BY THE NUMBERS

22.1 – That's the average number of points SMU allowed last year, which ranked 32nd in the country. It was the top scoring defense in the ACC.

16 – SMU was tied for 14th in interceptions recorded last year. Add six fumble recoveries and the Ponies registered 22 turnovers in 14 games.

43 – The Mustangs tied for the conference lead in sacks on the season with Duke. The 43 sacks were the sixth-most in the FBS.

KEEP AN EYE ON

SMU signed eight defensive linemen between the end of the 2024 season and the start of the summer. Four of those were added following spring practices, which suggested the Mustangs could be worried about the depth and talent level in the trenches. SMU was tremendous up front over the last two years and many of those players were quality transfers from power programs like Miami and Georgia. The new crop of transfers weren't as highly touted as recruits, but that doesn't mean they're not good football players who can replace the lost production from last year.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

DE JAKHI LANG

The Mizzou transfer picked SMU in the spring portal and arrived on the Hilltop this summer to reinforce the depth on the edge and help the Mustangs create pressure on opposing quarterbacks. He recorded three sacks in 12 games last year for the Tigers.

DB TYREN POLLEY

The true freshman from Duncanville might already be the third-best safety on the SMU roster. He'll play snaps this year behind experienced starters in Ahmad Moses and Isaiah Nwokobia. They're both seniors so Polley is considered next up in the safety room.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#9 Cameron
DE Robertson

6-4, 250, SR.
PLANO

#6 Jeffrey
DT M'Ba

6-6, 302, SR.
LIBREVILLE, GABON

#4 Terry
DT Webb

6-3, 314, SR.
GALVESTON BALL

#1 Isaiah
DE Smith

6-4, 244, SR.
WASHINGTON, D.C.

#54 Alexander
MLB Kilgore

6-1, 230, JR.
KATY PAETOW

#33 Zakye
WLB Barker

5-10, 225, JR.
NORCROSS, GA.

#21 Kyron
NB Chambers

6-0, 201, JR.
SOUTH OAK CLIFF

#7 Deuce
CB Harmon

5-10, 191, SR.
DENTON GUYER

#8 Marcellus
CB Barnes Jr.

6-1, 180, RS-FR.
CHATTANOOGA, TENN.

#23 Isaiah
SS Nwokobia

6-1, 202, SR.
DALLAS SKYLINE

#3 Ahmad
FS Moses

5-10, 200, SR.
MANSFIELD SUMMIT

#43 Wade
P McSparron

6-3, 195, RS-FR.
VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

DC
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BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS
FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

"It'll be interesting to see how they respond because they've lost some really good players, but they're trending well. They've recruited some really good players and they've done a good job. They're in on recruits that SMU never used to have a chance with. It'll be curious to see them (in 2025) because they bought a lot of guys for that first ACC run but it doesn't seem like they did that as much in this offseason. I'm not sure if the money dried up or what but they're good coaches over there and they'll continue to be good. That defensive line was one of the best in college football but all those guys are gone and I'm not sure they replaced them with the same type of talent. To me, they're what they should've always been. They're in the middle of Dallas, they have robust supporters, they have a lot to sell. Rhett does a good job."

DC
TXDave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALLCOLLEGE
SMU MUSTANGS

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Isaiah NWAKOBIA

Photo Credit: SMU Athletics

Where Legends Begin

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 30	East Texas A&M	W	Oct. 25	at Wake Forest	W
Sept. 6	Baylor	W	Nov. 1	Miami	L
Sept. 13	at Missouri State	W	Nov. 8	at Boston College	W
Sept. 20	at TCU	L	Nov. 22	Louisville	W
Oct. 4	Syracuse	W	Nov. 29	at Cal	W
Oct. 11	Stanford	W			
Oct. 18	at Clemson	L			

Record: 9-3 (6-2)

BIGGEST GAME — NOV. 1 VS. MIAMI

The best home schedule for SMU since the glory days of the Southwest Conference includes Baylor, Syracuse, and Louisville, but the headliner is a visit from "The U" to start November. The Mustangs possess plenty of Miami ties, including former Miami offensive coordinator Rhett Lashlee and a few transfers.

TRAP GAME — OCT. 25 AT WAKE FOREST

A trip to North Carolina to face the Demon Deacons and first-year head coach Jake Dickert is the definition of a trap game. The week before, SMU travels to Clemson. The week after, the Ponies host Miami. SMU avoided upsets in the 2024 run to the ACC championship game.

UPSET GAME — OCT. 18 AT CLEMSON

SMU fell to Clemson in the ACC championship game last December on a last-minute field goal in Charlotte and the Tigers enter 2025 as the odds-on favorite to claim the conference crown. The Mustangs travel to face Dabo Swinney midway through the 2025 campaign looking for revenge.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING 11-1

Matching last season's regular season record would likely punch SMU's second straight trip to the College Football Playoff. Quarterback Kevin Jennings is firmly in the driver's seat and the Ponies feel like the overall roster talent has improved in each year under Rhett Lashlee. Beat Baylor and TCU and the Mustangs could be 6-0 against Clemson.

FLOOR 6-6

The slate is much tougher for SMU in Year 2 as ACC members. The Ponies face Clemson and Miami in conference after a non-conference grind that includes Baylor and TCU. Home games against Syracuse and Louisville could also end up as coin flips. Bowl eligibility feels like the floor.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 24	at Nevada	W, 29-24	Nov. 2	Pitt	W, 48-25
Aug. 31	Houston Christian	W, 59-7	Nov. 16	Boston College	W, 38-28
Sept. 6	BYU	L, 18-15	Nov. 23	at Virginia	W, 33-7
Sept. 21	TCU	W, 66-42	Nov. 30	Cal	W, 38-6
Sept. 28	Florida State	W, 42-16	Dec. 7	Clemson (ACC Champ.)	L, 34-31
Oct. 5	at Louisville	W, 34-27	Dec. 21	at Penn State (CFP)	L, 38-10
Oct. 19	at Stanford	W, 40-10			
Oct. 26	at Duke	W, 28-27 (OT)			

Record: 11-3 (8-0)

RECRUITING BREAKDOWN

Three **GEMS**

QB TY HAWKINS

A former TCU commit, Hawkins flipped to SMU and headlines the Mustangs' 2024 class. The San Antonio native and IMG Academy product is a four-star dual-threat with sharp decision-making and explosive athleticism. He can extend plays with his legs or fire quick-strike passes, adding a dynamic weapon to SMU's quarterback room.

WR JALEN COOPER

Cooper is a polished technician who starred in the Navy All-American Bowl and finished with one of the class's most productive high school careers. His elite route-running and sticky hands make him a consistent chain-mover and deep threat. SMU fans can expect early production from this refined wideout.

LT DRAMODD ODOMS

Odoms brings long-term upside with true left tackle traits, highlighted by over 25 offers and top national rankings. His footwork, frame, and strength flash NFL potential, but he's still developing technically. SMU fans may not see an instant impact, but his tools make him a future cornerstone on the Mustangs' offensive line.



Jalen **COOPER**

Photo Credit: Ozy Jaimi

the **EXPERT'S TAKE**

RECRUITING
GRADE

A-

SMU's move to the ACC has paid immediate dividends on the recruiting trail, especially in Texas, where the Mustangs signed one of the most talented in-state classes in program history. The group is headlined by several four-star standouts and All-Americans who chose SMU over traditional national powers—clear proof that the brand is on the rise. While the core of the class is Texas-based, nine of the 23 signees hail from out of state, showing that SMU is growing its national brand without losing its roots. With a College Football Playoff appearance under its belt, SMU is recruiting like a contender.

2025 RECRUITING CLASS

HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE (247Sports Rank: 34th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Carterrious Brown	WR	6-2	165	Seguin
Jalen Cooper	WR	6-1	165	Cibola Steele
Devin Farris	OL	6-5	305	Houston Heights
Kyle Ferm	LB	6-3	225	Glendora (Calif.)
Zay Gentry	DB	6-0	170	Anna
Dramekco Green	RB	5-11	190	Conroe
Ty Hawkins	QB	6-0	195	IMG Academy (Fla.)
Drew Hill	OL	6-3	285	Centennial (Calif.)
Javion Holiday	DB	6-1	180	Duncanville
Abel Hoopii	OL	6-4	330	Farrington (Hawaii)
Mark Iheanachor	LB	6-2	215	Narbonne (Calif.)
Devon Martin	TE	6-5	240	Mesquite Poteet
Dramodd Odums	OL	6-6	300	Houston Lamar
Tyren Polley Jr.	DB	5-10	180	Duncanville
Elijah Pratt	DB	5-11	165	IMG Academy (Fla.)
Sael Reyes	DB	6-0	190	DeSoto
Link Rhodes	WR	6-2	200	San Joaquin Delta College (Calif.)
Isaiah Robertson	WR	6-0	185	Arlington
Jalen Shivers	Edge	6-4	235	South Gwinnett (Ga.)
Daylon Singleton	WR	5-10	165	DeSoto
La'Modrick Spencer	DB	6-1	175	Hutchinson C.C. (Kan.)
Miles Uter	TE	6-5	215	Bayside Academy (Ala.)
Tyron Winslow	DL	6-4	275	H. L. Bourgeois (La.)

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 41st)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Zakye Barker	LB	5-11	225	East Carolina
Marcellus Barnes Jr.	CB	6-1	180	Syracuse
Joshua Bates	OL	6-3	310	Oklahoma
Dylan Goffney	WR	6-0	210	Colorado State
TJ Harden	RB	6-2	220	UCLA
Chris Johnson Jr.	RB	6-0	180	Miami (Fl)
Yamir Knight	WR	5-8	180	James Madison
Jahkai Lang	DE	6-3	250	Missouri
Damarjhe Lewis	DL	6-3	300	Purdue
Jeffrey M'Ba	DL	6-6	300	Purdue
Zion Nelson	OT	6-5	315	Miami (Fl)
Addison Nichols	OL	6-5	330	Arkansas
Keveion'ta Spears	DL	6-4	297	Memphis
Williams Spencer	DL	6-5	305	Louisville
Eric Taylor	DL	6-4	290	Mississippi State
Tyler Van Dyke	QB	6-4	225	Wisconsin
Aakil Washington	DE	6-2	234	South Alabama
DJ Warner	Edge	6-3	215	Kansas

UNDER THE RADAR

DB TYREN POLLEY JR.

Polley is a hard-hitting, versatile defender who played for Texas powerhouse Duncanville. He reads the game well in zone, supports the run, and isn't afraid to lower the boom. Often overlooked, but always productive—Polley brings championship pedigree and swagger to a Mustangs defense that will love his energy and roster flex.

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American Athletic **CONFERENCE**

BY CARTER YATES

UNDER BOLD LEADERSHIP, AAC DARES TO DISRUPT

Tim Perneti was interviewing for the American Athletic Conference commissioner job, but he was the one asking questions.

"Do you have the appetite to get crazy?" he said.

Perneti's hiring on April 2, 2024, was the definitive answer. This league is no longer satisfied with being the best Group of Five conference in college football. They're hungry for the sport's next era.

Perneti loaded their plates with change during his first year on the job. He rebranded the conference from the "AAC" to "The American." He's on record that the American will sell conference naming rights to a corporation. He's courting private equity investment into the league. In March, the American became the first conference to set a minimum revenue share: member schools must distribute at least \$10 million total by the 2027–28 year.

"I want this conference to be known as the most innovative conference in collegiate athletics," Perneti said on "Next Up" with Adam Breneman.

Memphis (11-2, 6-2), Tulane (9-5, 7-1), South Florida (7-6, 4-4), and UTSA (7-6) gave him a vote of confidence when they declined the Pac-12's invitation to jump ship. Now, they're conference championship contenders heading into 2025.

Perneti could take a page from Memphis' playbook on outside investment. The Tigers' five-year NIL deal with FedEx allowed them to reel in the No. 1-ranked high school recruiting class in all of Group of Five football. Their No. 1-ranked transfer portal class in the American should also provide immediate impact. All-conference defensive lineman William Whitlow Jr. is one of the few familiar faces after posting four sacks last season.

Memphis' Ryan Silverfield and UTSA's Jeff Traylor have established themselves as the conference's premier coaches entering Year Six. Quarterback Owen McCown (3,422 yards, 25 touchdowns) is the American's returning leader in passing yards. Most of his supporting cast is back, including David "Touchdown Dave" Amador II. The Galena Park North Shore alum caught at least seven passes in each of his final four games after returning from injury.

USF's preseason hopes also hinge on a returning quarterback: senior Byrum Brown. The 6-3, 229-pound dual-threat holds a dozen

program records. He appeared on numerous postseason award watchlists last year before a leg injury ended his season after five games. Despite the setback, Alex Golesh became the first coach in program history to win bowl games in each of his first two seasons.

Tulane didn't skip a beat under new head coach Jon Sumrall, reaching its third consecutive conference championship game. A defensive coach by trade, Sumrall returns five of his top six tacklers. Newcomer Maurice Westmoreland (UTEP) could blossom into a star after back-to-back First-Team All-CUSA selections. Offensively, Tulane will rely on the run game, taking a committee approach to replace Makhi Hughes, who compiled 2,779 yards over two seasons.

It must've been an election year, because service academies **Army (12-2, 8-0)** and **Navy (10-3, 6-2)** both won double-digit games for the first time since 1945.

Navy will contend again with quarterback Blake Horvath, the conference's returning leader with 1,246 rushing yards and 17 touchdowns. The Midshipmen also return proven backs Alex Tecza (576 yards, 8 TDs) and Eli Heidenreich (444 yards, 3 TDs). Of note: Navy has never posted back-to-back double-digit win seasons.

Army, on the other hand, is in for a rebuild. The Black Knights rank 119th nationally in returning offensive production, most notably losing "Captain America" quarterback Bryson Daily. Reigning Conference Coach of the Year Jeff Monken will have to earn it again with a bevy of new faces in 2025. But if anyone can do it, the longest-tenured coach in the American can.

North Texas (6-7, 3-5) has fielded the conference's top offense in two seasons under

Eric Morris. The problem? Its defense ranked dead last in rushing yards allowed. Morris hopes 30-year-old defensive coordinator Skyler Cassity can fix that. Cassity led Sam Houston to the top of CUSA last year, allowing just 20.5 points per game.

Speaking of former Sam Houston coaches, KC Keeler took the **Temple (3-9, 2-6)** job after authoring one of the most underrated coaching performances in the country — turning the Bearkats from 3-9 to 10-3 in their second FBS season. He inherits a similar project in the Northeast, where the Owls haven't won more than three games in a season since 2018. Keep an eye on the senior-heavy defensive line.

Rice (4-8, 3-5) and **Charlotte (5-7, 4-4)** also hired proven winners.

Scott Abell was the winningest coach in Davidson history (47–28 over seven seasons). He brings his pistol-option offense to Rice. Don't think Army or Navy — think early Oregon under Chip Kelly. With Rice's academic standards limiting high school and transfer access, the Owls chose to zig offensively while others zag. Watching how Abell handles revenue sharing after coaching at a non-scholarship school will be worth monitoring.

Tim Albin comes to Charlotte after three straight 10-win seasons at Ohio — the most successful stretch in program history. He inherits a nearly blank roster. More than 15 starters entered the portal after former coach Biff Poggi's firing. Charlotte has posted just one winning season in 10 years as an FBS program.

East Carolina (8-5, 5-3) promoted from within. Defensive coordinator Blake Harrell took over for the fired Mike Houston midway through the season and led the Pirates to a 5-1



Brendon **LEWIS**

After transferring from Nevada, the former Melissa star is in line to start at Memphis, aiming for another run at the ACC title.

Photo Credit: Memphis Athletics

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finish, including a 26-21 win over NC State in the Military Bowl — ECU's first win over a Power Four team in six years. The move was announced at a team practice, and players mobbed Harrell in celebration.

Florida Atlantic (3-9, 1-7) and Tulsa (3-9, 1-7) went with rising offensive minds.

FAU's Zach Kittley is now the youngest head coach in the FBS at 33. He gained attention mentoring Bailey Zappe at Houston Christian and Western Kentucky, then led Texas Tech's offense to a top-10 national scoring mark in 2023.

Tulsa's Tre Lamb may be only 35, but he has five years of head coaching experience between Gardner-Webb (back-to-back FCS Playoff berths in 2022-23) and East Tennessee State (7-5 in 2024). He inherits a 3-9 program — but he's rebuilt three-win teams before.

Trent Dilfer is on the hottest seat in the American at **UAB (3-9, 2-6)**. He's struggled on the field with consecutive losing seasons and off the field with repeated PR gaffes.

After a 41-18 loss to Navy, he let his grandson sit in his lap during the postgame and said, "There's like two [reporters]. It's not like this is freakin' Alabama." A week later, on a podcast with UAB AD Mark Ingram, Dilfer said, "If you want to play big-time volleyball, go to Louisville," where his daughter plays. When Ingram mentioned attending UAB, Dilfer replied they "pull from different buckets."

Dilfer insists those comments don't reflect his love for the university — but the high-and-mighty tone doesn't land when the program keeps sinking.

Three **KEY GAMES**

MEMPHIS VS. NAVY, NOVEMBER 27

The final game of the regular season could be a win-and-get-in championship scenario. Navy QB Blake Horvath vs. Memphis DT William Whitlow Jr. is appointment television.

NORTH TEXAS VS UTSA, OCTOBER 18

North Texas fired its defensive coordinator last year after a 48-27 loss to UTSA. The Roadrunners return most of the key offensive players. Has North Texas improved?

CHARLOTTE VS RICE, SEPTEMBER 18

Scott Abell (Rice) and Tim Albin (Ohio) are the American's two head coaching hires who most closely resemble each other. The conference opener shows which one worked their magic sooner.

22

FIVE PLAYERS TO KNOW

TULANE EDGE MAURICE WESTMORELAND (KLEIN FOREST)

Westmoreland became a Texas-sized name over stints at Kilgore Junior College and UTEP. He had 21 tackles for loss and 15.5 sacks the last two years in El Paso.

SOUTH FLORIDA OT DEREK BOWMAN (MAGNOLIA)

Bowman, a right tackle, was the only USF offensive lineman to start every game of the season and helped pave the way for 34 rushing touchdowns, the second-most in program history.

MEMPHIS QB BRENDON LEWIS (MELISSA)

Lewis is the favorite to start, replacing fellow TXHSFB alum Seth Henigan. The sixth-year senior had his best statistical year at Nevada in 2024 (2,290 yards, 16 touchdowns).

ARMY LB ANDON THOMAS (LIBERTY HILL)

The former CenTex star found a home at West Point. Thomas led Army with 98 total tackles and added four tackles for loss and two interceptions. He was named third-team All-Conference.

TULSA LB CHRIS THOMPSON (DUNCANVILLE)

Thompson, who previously played at Auburn and USC, totaled a career-high 49 tackles for Tulsa in 2024. The 6'3, 234-pound linebacker has one season of eligibility remaining.



Chris THOMPSON

The nomadic career of the Duncanville star lands in Tulsa, where he is immediately one of the Golden Hurricane's best defenders.

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Dane Campbell's
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Photo Credit: Tulsa Athletics



BY MIKE CRAVEN

EXPERIENCE AND FIREPOWER FUEL MEAN GREEN'S 2025 AMBITIONS

Expectations are rising in Denton, America, as North Texas aims to finish above .500 for the first time since 2018. Head coach Eric Morris enters Year 3 with an 11–14 record over his first two seasons and believes the foundation set in that time will pay dividends in 2025.

“We played a lot of young guys these last couple of years and that should start paying off for us this year and next year,” Morris said. “There’s no way to replicate actually playing college football games, and this roster has a lot of experienced players — even if it was at the FCS level or somewhere other than here.”

The First Responder Bowl loss to Texas State was a perfect example of the youth movement for the Mean Green last season. Seven of the 11 starters on offense were either first- or second-year players. Ten true freshmen competed in the game, with six starting. In total, 24 players with fewer than two years of college experience participated in the 30–28 loss.

The schedule sets up favorably for North Texas. The non-conference slate includes home games against Lamar and Washington State and a trip to Western Michigan. Those three teams went a combined 21–17 last season. The AAC schedule doesn’t include conference favorites Memphis or Tulane, and the Mean Green host rival UTSA. They do face three option teams in Army, Navy, and Rice.

“We need to put it all together,” Morris said. “Looking at our schedule, there’s no reason that we can’t compete for a conference championship this year.”

Unfortunately, life as a G6 program is rarely linear. Gone are the days of organic development. Sure, North Texas played a ton of talented young players who could help them rise in the AAC — but that doesn’t mean they’re all still on campus. The Mean Green lost six transfers to Power Four programs, including standouts like offensive lineman Tyler Mercer (Kansas) and cornerback Brian Nelson II (NC State).

Morris knows that’s the price of doing business at this level. He moved from head coach at Incarnate Word to offensive coordinator at Washington State, and now head coach at North Texas. He’s lost his leading passer, rusher, and receiver after each of his two seasons in Denton. College football has become a one-year proposition from a roster standpoint, and Morris & Co. have chosen to embrace that reality rather than fight it.

“It’s challenging and time-consuming, but I think everyone is dealing with it, so it’s not

like we’re any different than the other teams at this level,” Morris said of roster fluidity in the portal era. “You can’t get mad at guys for taking an opportunity that helps their family financially or helps them move up the ladder. Our job is to replace those guys with good football players and go win games.”

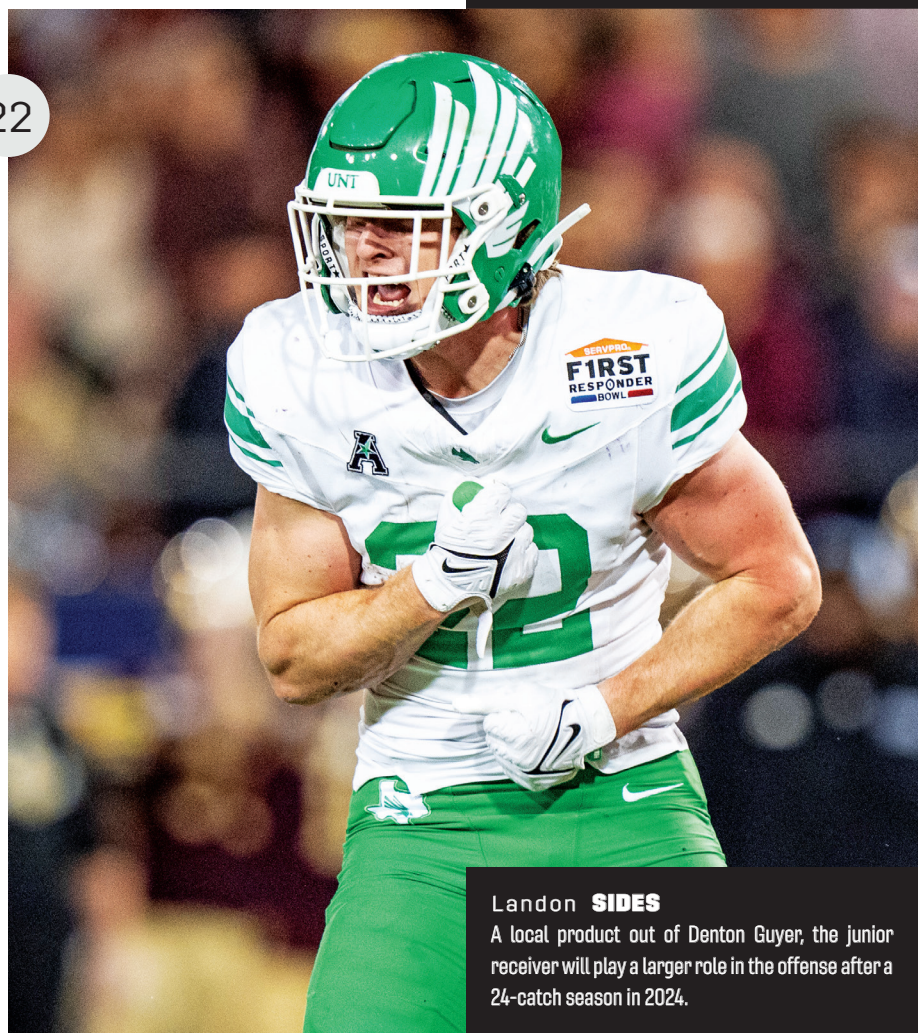
The biggest change for North Texas in the offseason wasn’t on the roster—it was on the coaching staff. The Mean Green averaged 33.5 points per game and ranked 23rd nationally in scoring offense. But the defense allowed 34.2 points per game, ranking 119th. Morris made a change, replacing defensive coordinator Matt Caponi with Skyler Cassity, who transformed the Sam Houston defense in his first year on campus and helped the Bearkats win 10 games.

“(Skyler) has made one-year turnarounds at ACU and Sam Houston, so I was confident that he can do the same here,” Morris said. “I give so much autonomy to the defensive staff with me being so involved in the offense that I wanted someone who was confident and had called plays before.”

For the second year in a row, North Texas is replacing its leading passer, rusher, and receiver on the offensive side of the ball. But fear not, Mean Green faithful. Head coach Eric Morris figured it out last year and went on to post another Top 25 scoring offense.

The biggest change in the offseason was the arrival of new defensive coordinator Skyler Cassity, who helped Sam Houston win 10 games last year. The conference schedule doesn’t include Memphis or Tulane, and the UTSA game is at home. The Mean Green might end the season as the best G6 team in Texas.

22



Landon **SIDES**

A local product out of Denton Guyer, the junior receiver will play a larger role in the offense after a 24-catch season in 2024.

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PASSING GAME COORDINATOR
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LAMAR

SEPTEMBER 13


WASHINGTON ST.

SEPTEMBER 27


SOUTH ALABAMA

OCTOBER 10


SOUTH FLORIDA

OCTOBER 18


UTSA

NOVEMBER 1


NAVY

NOVEMBER 28/29*


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THE OFFENSE

North Texas isn't shying away from its goal to lead the country in scoring during the 2025 season. The Mean Green ranked 23rd last year with 33.5 points per game and 20th in 2023, averaging 34.5 points. They were third nationally in total offense, trailing only Miami and Ole Miss.

"This is the most electric offense you could ever play in," wide receiver Landon Sides said in the spring. "It's the most receiver-friendly offense in existence and the most fun I've ever played in. The number of opportunities to get the ball is unmatched. If we execute, we should be the top offense in the country."

A new quarterback will direct the offense for the third time in three years after Chandler Morris transferred to Virginia. The Mean Green added Miami's Reese Poffenbarger from the transfer portal to compete with redshirt freshman Drew Mestemaker, who made a name for himself in the bowl game last season by throwing for 393 yards and accounting for three touchdowns in a thriller against Texas State.

Poffenbarger is on his fourth team since 2021. He began his career at Old Dominion before starring at Albany, where he threw for over 6,000 yards and 60 touchdowns in 26 games. He spent 2024 at Miami as the backup to Cam Ward, who played for Eric Morris at UIW and Washington State.

"We split the first-team reps with Reese and Drew throughout the spring, and we'll compile as much information as possible over the summer before making a call on who starts," Morris said. "We ask our quarterbacks to do a lot."

North Texas must also replace its top three receivers from last year. The Mean Green feel like they hit on both transfer additions: Simeon Evans (Sam Houston) and Cam Dornier (Shepherd). They'll be joined by Sides, who moves to outside receiver and could lead the team in catches, and slot receiver Miles Coleman, who plays bigger than his 5-foot-6 frame. Tight ends Brandon Young Jr. and West Georgia transfer Tre Williams III are names to watch.

Improving the run game is a 2025 priority. They'll need to do it without Shane Porter, who transferred after leading the team in rushing. Sophomores Makenzie McGill II and Jayden Becks impressed in the spring. McGill averaged six yards per carry and led the team with 10 rushing touchdowns.

The Mean Green added six linemen via the portal, including Dylan Shaw (Texas Tech) and Willie Goodacre (Syracuse). Kent State transfer Jimto Obidegwu is expected to start at right tackle, and Abilene Christian transfer Tay Yanta is the favorite at left guard. Sophomore Braydon Nelson, who started 11 times as a true freshman, should become a stalwart at left tackle. Johnny Dickson is the likely starter at right guard. A healthy Gabe Blair should solidify the center spot.

BY THE

NUMBERS

33.5 – North Texas ranked 23rd nationally in points per game with nearly 34. The Mean Green's 58 touchdowns in 13 games were also top 25 in the FBS.

328.2 – That's the average number of passing yards per game for the Mean Green in 2024, which was fourth-most in the country.

58.93 – North Texas' touchdown percentage in the red zone ranked 80th in the country and it plagued the Mean Green in tight games against quality competition.

KEEP AN EYE ON

A beat-up running back room and offensive line unit hampered North Texas' ability to provide balance in the run game. The Mean Green ranked 115th in FBS with 384 rushing attempts in 13 games. They ranked 120th nationally with 29.54 rushing attempts per game. More depth at running back and along the offensive line should help keep pressure off a new starting quarterback. A better run game could also help the North Texas defense keep points off the board. Only five teams posted less time of possession per game than the Mean Green last year.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

RB JAYDEN BECKS

The Waxahachie product spent the last two seasons at Missouri State where he played in 22 games. He tallied 1,116 all-purpose yards last year while averaging 6.76 yards a rush on 68 attempts. Becks is also a solid pass catcher out of the backfield and a weapon in the return game.

WR CAMERON DORNER

The 6-1 Dornier played in 33 games and started 17 times over a three-year career at Division II Shepherd University in West Virginia. He caught 52 passes for 702 yards and five touchdowns last year en route to an All-PSAC East Second Team selection.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#7 Reese
QB Poffenbarger
6-0, 210, SR.
MIDDLETOWN, MD.

#0 Makenzie
RB McGill II
5-9, 202, SO.
MOUNT VERNON

#22 Landon
WR Sides
5-11, 190, JR.
DENTON GUYER

#3 Simeon
WR Evans
5-11, 208, SR.
MANSFIELD TIMBERVIEW

#1 Miles
WR Coleman
5-6, 159, SO.
VANDEGRIFT

#87 Brandon
TE Young Jr.
6-5, 239, SO.
MANSFIELD LEGACY

#67 Braydon
LT Nelson
6-4, 321, SO.
KILGORE

#70 Tay
LG Yanta
6-4, 335, SR.
FALLS CITY

#65 Gabe
C Blair
6-2, 306, SR.
DENTON GUYER

#54 Johnny
RG Dickson III
6-2, 296, JR.
CORPUS CHRISTI FLOUR BLUFF

#72 Jimto
RT Obidegwu
6-5, 335, SR.
BRANDYWINE, MD.

Kali
K Nguma
5-10, 186, SO.
SHARYLAND

THE DEFENSE

The North Texas football team was Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in the first two years of the Eric Morris era. The offense was prolific. The defense was catastrophic, allowing 34.2 points per game last year — a three-point improvement from the 37.1 allowed in 2023.

Enter Skyler Cassity. Morris was a young offensive coordinator at Texas Tech when Cassity began his coaching journey as a GA for the Red Raiders. He became the defensive coordinator at Abilene Christian in 2022 and helped Sam Houston win 10 games in 2024. The Bearkats ranked 64th in FBS scoring defense while allowing 26.2 points per game in 2023, a year before Cassity arrived. They allowed just 20.5 points per game in 2024, good for 21st nationally.

“We’ll play a fast and aggressive style of defense,” Cassity said. “We’re multiple from a personnel standpoint, so whatever we feel gives us the best chance to be successful against a specific offense, that’s what we’ll play.”

North Texas will base out of a four-man front after two years in an odd-man front, which required retooling the defensive line—especially on the edge. The unit lost starting defensive end Breyton Charles to Purdue after spring practices but added potential contributors like Briceon Hayes (Sam Houston), Keviyen Huddleston (TCU), Ethan Day (Wyoming), Will Smith (Tulsa), and Avion Carter (TCU).

Depth on the interior was a concern exiting spring. Fatafehi Vailea II — better known as “June” — returns to start at defensive tackle. Sam Houston transfer Richard Outland Jr. is the expected starter at nose guard. Jayden Williams is a young player to watch. Louisville transfer Saadiq Clements was added in the spring portal window.

The linebacker room will also be led by a Sam Houston transfer, as Trey Fields steps into the leadership role. The sixth-year player started 12 games last season under Cassity, tallying 80 tackles, six TFLs, and a sack. He’ll be flanked by senior Shane Whitter and junior Ethan Wesloski.

Secondary play is pivotal in Cassity’s scheme, and he’ll frequently deploy five defensive backs. Cornerbacks David Fisher and Da’veawn Armstead followed him from Sam Houston, combining for 11 pass breakups and two interceptions last year. The Mean Green lost Brian Nelson II to NC State after spring.

Evan Jackson (59 tackles, 3 INTs) returns as one of the starters at safety. Old Dominion transfer Will Jones II finished spring as the other deep safety. Sophomore Quinton Hammonds is penciled in at nickel. The Mean Green also added Julian Knox (TCU) and Chase Canada (Illinois) to the secondary.

“We’ve been able to establish a standard on defense quickly at a couple of places,” Cassity said, “and I’m looking forward to doing that here, as well.”

BY THE

NUMBERS

34.2 – North Texas gave up the 119th-most points in the FBS last season and somehow it was a nearly three-point improvement from the 2023 season.

28 – That’s the number of rushing touchdowns allowed by the Mean Green defense in 2024. Opponents ran for over 2,500 yards with a staggering 41.85 attempts per contest.

78 – Only four teams — Arkansas State, Oklahoma State, Tulsa, and Ball State – allowed more 20-plus yard plays from scrimmage than North Texas.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Skyler Cassity’s defense at Sam Houston was one of the best at creating turnovers, ranking seventh in the FBS after forcing a total of 27. That included 11 recovered fumbles and 16 interceptions. The North Texas defense was 77th in turnovers forced last year with only 16 total. Modern offenses are nearly impossible to shut down. The goal for most good defenses is to force field goals and create a couple of takeaways a game. If the Mean Green can steal a few possessions for their high-powered offense, they can compete with any team in the AAC.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

DT JAYDEN WILLIAMS

North Texas needs the sophomore from Louisiana to become a rotational player in the middle of the Mean Green defense. He played in nine games last year and ended with five tackles. Williams was an honorable mention All-State selection in 2023 and was a standout on the basketball court as a prep athlete.

DB B.J. ALLEN JR.

The Aledo graduate spent two years at Texas and was an Under Armour All-American as a four-star prospect in 2022. Allen played in eight games last year for the Mean Green, recording eight tackles and a forced fumble. Now a junior, Allen will be a factor at safety.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#90 Ethan
DE Day

6-4, 250, JR.
RIPON, CALIF.

#88 Richard
NT Outland Jr.

6-3, 288, SR.
ALIEF TAYLOR

#15 Fatafehi
DT Vailea II

6-1, 292, SR.
OAKLAND, CALIF.

#44 Briceon
DE Hayes

6-3, 231, SR.
HUNTSVILLE

#6 Trey
WLB Fields

6-0, 212, SR.
SWEENEY

#7 Shane
MLB Whitter

6-0, 229, SR.
BURLINGTON, NC

#11 Quinton
NB Hammonds

6-1, 219, SO.
ALLEN

#1 David
CB Fisher

5-11, 182, SR.
PEARLAND DAWSON

#2 Da’veawn
CB Armstead

6-1, 183, SR.
BATON ROUGE, LA.

#0 Will
SS Jones II

5-10, 186, SR.
MANSFIELD SUMMIT

#3 Evan
FS Jackson

5-11, 183, JR.
GALENA PARK NORTH SHORE

#41 Sawyer
P Evans

6-3, 204, SR.
ARLINGTON MARTIN

DTX

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BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS
FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

"I think Eric (Morris) is one of the best offensive minds in college football. I think he's one of those guys who could go be the offensive coordinator for the Seattle Seahawks and he wouldn't miss a beat. I think he's one of the best out there and I think really highly of him as a person, too. Every year, they're going to score points. They went heavy high school early on and maybe that hurt the roster a bit last year, but they'll be good the next couple of years."

"The new defensive coordinator (Skyler Casity) is a really sharp young coach. He's been around a bunch of really good coaches his entire career. He has a certain swagger about him and that's a good sign for a young coach. He's a relentless recruiter. Eric hit a home run on that hire. Defense is the thing holding that program back. Maybe it won't be anymore."

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NORTH TEXAS MEAN GREEN

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Fatafehi VAILEA II

Photo Credit: UNT Athletics

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Where Legends Begin

SCHEDULE & PREDICTIONS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 30	Lamar	W	Oct. 24	at Charlotte	W
Sept. 6	at Western Michigan	W	Nov. 1	Navy	L
Sept. 13	Washington State	L	Nov. 15	at UAB	W
Sept. 20	at Army	L	Nov. 22	at Rice	W
Sept. 27	South Alabama	W	Nov. 29	Temple	W
Oct. 10	South Florida	L			
Oct. 18	UTSA	W			

Record: 8-4 (5-3)

BIGGEST GAME- OCT. 18 VS. UTSA

The Mean Green have lost four straight to their rivals from San Antonio and have given up at least 30 points in each of those defeats. With no Tulane or Memphis on the AAC schedule, knocking off UTSA could catapult North Texas to conference championship game contention.

TRAP GAME- NOV. 22 AT RICE

North Texas has a chance to close strong in 2025 due to an easier end-of-the-year calendar that includes Charlotte and Temple. A trip to Rice in the second-to-last game of the season could be tricky if the Mean Green don't improve against the run because the Owls are all-in on a new option attack.

UPSET GAME- SEPT. 13 VS. WASHINGTON STATE

Sure, the Cougars are no longer a Power Four program, but that doesn't mean a home win over the Pac-12 foes wouldn't be a feather in the cap for Eric Morris' program. Washington State is breaking in a new head coach and quarterback in 2025.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING: 10-2

North Texas is a dark horse candidate to reach the AAC championship game because of a change at defensive coordinator and a schedule that doesn't include perennial contenders Memphis or Tulane. Tough games against UTSA, South Florida, and Navy are at home. A trip to Army on Sept. 20 is the toughest game away from Denton.

FLOOR: 6-6

Losing one-score games to quality conference opponents is a trend that North Texas hopes to buck in 2025. But if those struggles continue, the Mean Green are back to scratching out bowl eligibility. They're breaking in a new quarterback and changing defensive philosophies, and there's no guarantees both hit immediately.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 31	at South Alabama	W, 52-38	Oct. 26	Tulane	L, 45-37
Sept. 7	SFA	W, 35-20	Nov. 9	Army	L, 14-3
Sept. 14	at Texas Tech	L, 66-21	Nov. 15	at UTSA	L, 48-27
Sept. 21	Wyoming	W, 44-17	Nov. 23	East Carolina	L, 40-28
Sept. 28	Tulsa	W, 52-20	Nov. 30	at Temple	W, 24-17
Oct. 12	at Florida Atlantic	W, 41-37	Jan. 3	Texas State (First Responder Bowl)	L, 30-28
Oct. 19	at Memphis	L, 52-44			

Record: 6-7 (3-5)

RECRUITING BREAKDOWN

Three GEMS

QB CHRIS JIMERSON JR.

Jimerson brings elite athleticism to the quarterback position. Originally recruited as a receiver, he proved himself as a state-champion pedigree passer with zip and timing. His ability to stretch the field with his arm and legs makes him one of the most exciting incoming signal-callers in the G6.

WR TYLER BROWN

Brown, a 4.38 burner, is a slot weapon with game-breaking speed. He gets open quickly and thrives in clutch situations. North Texas fans should expect him to be an early contributor who adds a vertical dimension and separation ability that defensive backs will struggle to contain.

LB BRENDEN REESE

A physical and dependable linebacker, Reese was the heart of Longview's defense. He delivers bone-rattling hits and plays with discipline in space. His reliability and leadership make him an ideal building block for the Mean Green defense. You want toughness and consistency in the middle? That's Reese.



Terrence LEWIS

Photo Credit: James Loyea

the EXPERT'S TAKE

RECRUITING
GRADE

C

DCTF RECRUITING ANALYST GREG POWERS

North Texas continues to navigate the challenges of the transfer portal era. Their roster churn has forced the Mean Green to hit the portal hard, but there's still a clear commitment to high school recruiting. Head coach Eric Morris signed 12 prep prospects in this cycle — eight from Texas — as the staff aims to develop talent from the ground up. The next step? Retention. Holding on to the program's top performers will be the key to building long-term success in Denton, especially when those players had other high-level college options.

2025 RECRUITING CLASS

HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE (247Sports Rank: 96th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Antwon Brown	DL	6-2	285	Duncanville
Tyler Brown	WR	5-9	170	Aubrey
Bryce Garza	DB	6-2	185	Frenship
Caleb Hawkins	RB	6-2	200	North Rock Creek (Okla.)
Chris Jimerson Jr.	QB	5-10	165	North Crowley
Brayden Knox	DL	6-3	220	Putnam City (Okla.)
Terrence Lewis	WR	5-10	160	Bryan
Jaden Manning	LB	6-1	210	Mansfield Legacy
Demetrie Morgan	Edge	6-5	235	Butler C.C. (Kan.)
Jordan Reasonover	OL	6-3	265	Spring Westfield
Brenden Reese	LB	6-0	205	Longview
Roberto Rodriguez	OL	6-4	270	Deer Park

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 97th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Kenton Allen	LB	6-2	225	Angelo State
Da'Veawn Armstead	CB	6-1	185	Sam Houston
Jayden Becks	RB	5-11	185	Missouri State
S'Maje Burrell	LB	6-0	220	Sam Houston
Avion Carter	DL	6-4	280	TCU
Saadig Clements	DL	6-4	295	Louisville
Isaiah Collins	CB	6-3	190	Texas Tech
Chase Canada	CB	6-0	195	Illinois
Ethan Day	DL	6-4	255	Wyoming
Cameron Dorner	WR	6-2	190	Shepherd
Jalyn Durgan	EDGE	6-4	251	South Alabama
Simeon Evans	WR	6-1	200	Sam Houston
Trey Fields	LB	6-0	215	Sam Houston
David Fisher	CB	6-0	185	Sam Houston
Will Goodacre	OL	6-5	331	Syracuse
Briceon Hayes	Edge	6-3	245	Sam Houston
Keviyan Huddleston	DL	6-2	265	TCU
Tyrese Hunt-Thompson	WR	6-1	184	Ferris State
Will Jones II	S	5-9	190	Old Dominion
Julian Knox	S	6-2	200	TCU
Jaymon Lamb	OT	6-5	250	SFA
Ugonna Nnanna	IOL	6-4	310	Virginia
Jimto Obidegwu	OT	6-4	300	Kent State
Richard Outland Jr.	DL	6-3	290	Sam Houston
Joshua Pierce	DL	6-5	255	Campbell
Reese Poffenbarger	QB	6-0	210	Miami (FL)
Dylan Shaw	OL	6-4	315	Texas Tech
Will Smith	Edge	6-4	225	Tulsa
Patrick Smith-Young	S	5-10	190	Old Dominion
Connor Vaughn	TE	6-4	245	Tulsa
Tre Williams III	TE	6-3	220	Limestone
Quincy Wright	DL	6-2	315	Sam Houston
Tay Yanta	IOL	6-5	330	Abilene Christian

UNDER THE RADAR

ROBERTO RODRIGUEZ

Rodriguez is a gritty, athletic lineman who brings wrestling-style leverage and strong movement skills. A regional discus qualifier with great balance, he plays with natural bend and excels at engaging defenders in space. Once he adds mass in the weight room, his potential as a road grader is real.

DC
TX

TEXAS FOOTBALL
Dave Campbell's

COLLEGE
NORTH TEXAS MEAN GREEN

**BY MIKE CRAVEN****OWLS BET BIG ON SHOTGUN OPTION AND PROVEN WINNER ABELL**

Rice was one of two FBS programs in the state of Texas to make a coaching change ahead of the 2025 season, the other being Sam Houston. The Owls relieved Mike Bloomgren of his duties at the end of October following a loss to Connecticut, the sixth of the season. The defeat guaranteed that the Owls wouldn't finish the regular season above .500 for the 10th straight season. Bloomgren finished his tenure on South Main with a record of 24–52 in seven seasons.

Pay attention to coaching changes in college football closely enough and a trend emerges: the next coach is typically a complete 180 from the previous one. That was especially true for the Rice Owls. Bloomgren ran a pro-style offense after his days in the NFL and at Stanford. Rice wanted to zig while the rest of the state zags. The Owls scoured the country for a coach with a unique offense and experience winning at prestigious academic institutions without any recent success. They found it in Scott Abell, who spent his college coaching career at Washington and Lee, and Davidson.

"I don't see the high academic standards as challenges — I see them as opportunities," Abell said. "Using the great reputation of what Rice is to our advantage to attract great scholar-athletes here, and that's been the formula at my previous two stops."

The state of Texas has been defined by Air Raid offenses for the past 20 years. We're a 7-on-7 state that loves to throw the football around the yard. Coaches like Mike Leach and Todd Dodge are revered and copied in the Lone Star State. But not Abell. He's an outsider, and that's exactly what the Owls wanted.

Abell runs a unique version of the option. He's not from the Army or Navy tree. He compares it more to old-school Oregon when Chip Kelly was running the Ducks. Rice will run the option out of the shotgun. In 2024, Abell's Davidson squad led the FCS in rushing for the fifth consecutive year and the sixth time in seven seasons, averaging 315 yards per game and 5.4 yards per carry.

His offense didn't start that way, however. Abell first fell in love with option football while watching Tom Osborne's Nebraska squads in the 1990s. After a brief career as a minor league baseball player, Abell returned home to Virginia and began life as a teacher and a high school coach. He ran the option under center until he landed at Washington and Lee as an offensive coordinator. There, he visited FCS program Wofford in 2009 because Wade Lang was

dabbling with the option from the shotgun. It was love at first sight.

"That visit was career-changing for me. There is no other way to describe it," Abell said. "In my last 15 years of coaching, we've led the country in rushing 10 times. It allowed us to be more creative and to open the passing game up while keeping guys healthy. And the kids we were recruiting were playing in shotgun formations. It all just made too much sense."

And so did Rice's interest in Abell. Why be the 10th-best Air Raid program in the state? The Owls want their own identity. They want success. Option football is back in vogue, especially in the American Athletic Conference. Abell knows he wasn't a household name, especially in Texas. He's okay with any pessimism or doubt outside the football offices on Rice's campus. He wasn't hired to make a splash or to win the press conference. He was hired to get the Owls into conference contention.

"When the announcement happened, I'd imagine two questions were asked: 'Davidson plays football?' and 'Who is Scott Abell?'" he joked this spring. "I'm okay with that. But I'm here because I've won. I've won everywhere, at places where people struggled to find the right answers."

10

**Quinton JACKSON**

One of the most consistent performers for the Owls, Jackson should take center-stage in the new-look Rice offense under Scott Abell.

DC
TXDave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALLCOLLEGE
RICE OWLS

THE OFFENSE

New head coach Scott Abell said he was able to install roughly 60 to 70 percent of his option attack in his first spring with the Owls—a number he was happy with. “It has a great shot of looking like I want it to in Year 1,” he said. “The offense will mirror the strength of the quarterback who wins the job.”

The quarterback battle was a three-man race at the end of spring. Athletic junior Chase Jenkins, who was moved to wide receiver by the previous staff, took the first-team reps in the spring game. His ability to run gives him an advantage in the new system. Redshirt freshman Drew Devillier and junior AJ Padgett are also in the mix. The Owls added Kennesaw State transfer Lucas Scheerhorn in the spring portal window.

Running back Quinton Jackson was the first name Abell mentioned when asked about offensive standouts. The 5-foot-7, 160-pound junior plays bigger than his stature and fits what the new staff wants to do. “He’s lightning quick with a real burst,” Abell said. “He’ll be a guy who thrives in this system.” Sophomore Taji Atkins, from nearby Spring Westfield, also impressed. The room is young, but Abell and his staff feel good about the talent.

The Rice offensive line might be the biggest benefactor of the schematic change. Abell says the option attack takes pressure off linemen through heavy use of double teams and angle blocks. The commitment to the run also forces defenses to play more base, reducing exotic blitz looks. Center David Stickle and guard John Long figure to be starters. Yale transfer Sean Sullivan is a potential starter at left tackle.

“The offensive line had a great spring and bought into the new system right away,” Abell said. “A lot of position battles will continue into fall camp, but that group learned and improved every day. We feel like it could be a real strength for us immediately.”

The X receiver in the new Rice offense is left on an island and must win one-on-one matchups outside. “Our receivers won’t lead the country in receptions, but big plays and yards after the catch are important.” Braylon Walker and Landon Ransom-Goelz are names to watch. True freshman Payton Matthews is a promising young prospect.

Abell describes his slot receivers as “do-it-all guys who need to be dynamic because they’re pivotal in our pitch phase. They’ll also be asked to take a fly sweep and make some plays.” Aaron Turner, who transferred from Cincinnati, and Tyson Thompson were two names mentioned at slot.

“In an ideal world, this offense distributes the ball to a lot of different guys,” Abell said. “We want to take what the defense gives us and best use our personnel. We can lean into our strengths based on who ends up on the field, and that’s one of the best parts of this system.”

BY THE NUMBERS

22.2 – Rice struggled to score points as the Owls ranked 112th in scoring offense with just over 22 points per game – a full touchdown less than in 2023.

11 – The Owls fielded one of the best pass protection units in America while allowing fewer than one sack per game.

22 – The 22 turnovers lost by the Rice offense ranked 106th nationally and was fifth-most in the state of Texas. Thirteen were interceptions.

KEEP AN EYE ON

The Owls were quieter in the transfer portal than most schools undergoing a transition at head coach. The high academic standards, and the fact that a Rice degree is not something current players usually want to walk away from, means that new head coach Scott Abell is rolling into Year 1 with an inherited roster. He did add a few potential weapons at wide receiver and in the slot during the spring portal period. Max Balthazer (Coastal Carolina), Artis Cole (Louisiana-Monroe), and David Kasemervisz (Stanford) should all compete for snaps immediately in the Rice offense.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

RB TAJI ATKINS

The 5-7 sophomore from nearby Spring Westfield received high praise in the spring from the new coaching staff. He scored on two of his five carries as a freshman in 2024, but expect his role to be much larger in the new option attack implemented by head coach Scott Abell.

WR TYSON THOMPSON

A new offense might unleash Thompson’s potential. He arrived at Rice from Houston Christian back in 2022 and played mostly on special teams during his two healthy seasons. He missed 2023 with an injury. Thompson caught three passes last season. He can be a weapon in the return game, as well.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#9 Chase QB Jenkins 6-0, 190, SO. ALIEF TAYLOR	#10 Quinton RB Jackson 5-7, 160, JR. NORTH CROWLEY	#81 Braylen WR Walker 5-10, 171, JR. SULPHUR, LA.	#6 Drayden WR Dickmann 5-11, 182, SO. GEORGETOWN
#2 Aaron WR Turner 5-8, 185, SR. ELLICOTT, MD.	#49 Micah TE Barnett 6-1, 232, SR. DICKINSON	#67 Luke LT Needham 6-5, 295, SO. GERMANTOWN, TENN.	#76 John LG Long 6-4, 345, SR. LAMPASAS
#64 David C Stickle 6-3, 288, SR. PACE, FLA.	#50 Patrick RG Valent 6-3, 327, SO. WARREN, OHIO	#53 Luke RT Miller 6-5, 277, SO. ROUND ROCK	#82 Chase K Allen 6-2, 195, SR. COLLEYVILLE HERITAGE

THE DEFENSE

Scott Abell might be an outsider to Texas, but he's no stranger to high school politics. A former high school coach himself, Abell understands the importance of establishing strong relationships with local power brokers — especially in a talent-rich area like Houston.

So when he took the job at Rice and realized one of the best high school coaches in recent Texas history was already on staff, the move was obvious: promote him to defensive coordinator. That coach was Jon Kay. And for a program that hasn't won more than six games since 2014, easy wins can't be passed up.

"His passion and energy come out in the players," Abell said of Kay, who joined the Rice staff in March 2023 as linebackers coach. Kay went 117-18 in nine seasons at Galena Park North Shore, winning four Class 6A state titles.

Kay's familiarity with the roster will help ease Abell's transition as he overhauls the offense and installs the option. Keeping continuity on defense was a smart play. Expect Rice to run a similar scheme to what they did under former defensive coordinator Brian Smith — with tweaks as Kay makes it his own.

The linebacker corps should be the strength of the unit. Ty Morris and Andrew Awe, now a full-time linebacker, are the top returning tacklers. The duo combined for 108 tackles, 11.5 tackles for loss, and five sacks. "The linebacker room really jumps off the page," Abell said post-spring. Kaleb Blanton, Cooper King, and Beau Barton add depth at the second level.

Defensive tackle Blake Boenisch returns to anchor the line. The 6-foot-3, 332-pounder from Needville has appeared in 37 games at Rice and was the only lineman listed above 300 pounds in the spring. Fellow senior Elroyal Morris III is a potential starter at nose tackle. He tallied 12 tackles, including 1.5 sacks, in 11 games last season.

BYU transfer Michael Daley earned praise for his pass-rushing ability in the spring. A former three-star recruit, Daley missed 2022 with injury and played in five games for BYU in 2023. Sophomore Joseph Mutombo is another name to know at defensive end. The Keller Central product recorded three tackles for loss and two sacks in 12 games last season.

Former walk-on Daveon Hook is in line for a starting spot at one of the safety positions. Marcus Williams is healthy again and could project as a starter in the secondary, though he'll battle the experienced Peyton Stevenson for snaps. Plae Wyatt is a name to know at nickel — a position called "Viper" under the previous staff. Wyatt missed the spring while rehabbing but is expected to be 100 percent by fall and a regular contributor.

BY THE

NUMBERS

25.4 – That's the number of points per game allowed by the Rice defense last year, which was 70th in the FBS. Jon Kay takes over as defensive coordinator.

33 – The Owls did a great job sacking the quarterback last year as the defense ranked 35th nationally with 33 sacks.

66.6 – Opponents scored a touchdown in two of every three possessions against Rice last year, which was 102nd in the country and second worst in Texas.

KEEP AN EYE ON

The Owls ranked seventh in the FBS in passing defense last year after only allowing 173.8 yards per game through the air. To repeat that success, the secondary must replace long-time starters such as safeties Gabe Taylor and Tyson Flowers and cornerback Sean Fresch. Rice left spring ball without concrete answers at the cornerback position. JUCO cornerback Jerrick Harper was the first transfer addition with Scott Abell in charge. He spent the last two seasons at Trinity Valley. Stanford cornerback Omari Porter also transferred to Rice in the winter portal and arrived with 31 games of experience at the Power Four level.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

DL VJ BRONSON

Depth is always a concern in the interior of the defensive line and Bronson was added in the spring portal window to help reinforce the trenches. He's played at Lamar, Arkansas State, and most recently North Texas as he enters his fifth season of college football.

DB MARCUS WILLIAMS

Injuries have held the Alabama native back in his career at Rice. He missed the back half of 2023 with an injury and only played in three games last year. Williams returned in the spring and the staff expects him to contribute this fall.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#8 Joseph
DE Mutombo

6-5, 270, SO.
KELLER CENTRAL

#75 Blake
NT Boenisch

6-3, 332, SR.
NEEDVILLE

#30 Elroyal
DT Morris III

6-3, 278, SR.
SPRING DEKANEY

#49 Michael
RUSH Daley

6-2, 238, JR.
ALPINE, UTAH

#27 Andrew
MLB Awe

6-2, 238, SR.
MANSFIELD LAKE RIDGE

#3 Ty
WLB Morris

6-2, 218, JR.
SPRING DEKANEY

#41 Plae
VIPER Wyatt

5-11, 202, SR.
MCKINNEY BOYD

#14 Ephraim
CB Dotson

5-9, 177, RS-FR.
FORT BEND HIGHTOWER

#7 Omari
CB Porter

6-2, 200, SR.
AUBURN, ALA.

#29 Daveon
FS Hook

5-11, 185, SR.
CIBOLO STEELE

#4 Marcus
SS Williams

5-11, 198, SR.
HOOVER, ALA.

#91 Alex
P Bacchetta

6-2, 227, SO.
ATLANTA, GA.

SCHEDULE & PREDICTIONS

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS
FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

“Elevating Jon Kay to defensive coordinator was a wise move. He’s a legend in this state and everybody likes and respects him at the high school level. Rice will always need to recruit from the high school ranks because of what they are as a university and Kay gives the new head coach instant credibility on the road, especially around Houston.”

“No one wants to play against offenses like the one coming to Rice. You don’t see it any other time during the year so practicing for it is tough. I feel bad for the first couple of teams on their schedule. Don’t be surprised if they bite someone early out of shock and awe.”

“Rice probably needed to think outside the box. Most of the new offensive innovation – what Kansas was doing, Liberty, Coastal Carolina, UNLV with Brennan Marion – is run oriented. That’s back en vogue.”



Scott ABELL

Photo Credit: Rice Athletics

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
AUG. 30	at Louisiana	L	OCT. 25	UConn	L
SEPT. 6	HOUSTON	L	OCT. 31	MEMPHIS	L
SEPT. 13	PRAIRIE VIEW A&M	W	NOV. 8	UAB	W
SEPT. 18	at Charlotte	W	NOV. 22	NORTH TEXAS	L
SEPT. 27	at Navy	L	NOV. 29	at South Florida	L
OCT. 4	FLORIDA ATLANTIC	W			
OCT. 11	at UTSA	L			

RECORD: 4-8 (3-5)

BIGGEST GAME — SEPT. 18 AT CHARLOTTE

Rice’s first conference game with Scott Abell in charge is a trip to Charlotte to face another first-year head coach in Tim Albin, who was previously at Ohio and was reportedly in the mix to become the head coach on South Main. The winner achieves an early proof of concept.

TRAP GAME — OCT. 4 VS. FLORIDA ATLANTIC

There are no trap games for a program that hasn’t posted a winning record since 2014, but we’ll take the home game against FAU and another first-year head coach in Zach Kittley, who was formerly the offensive coordinator at Texas Tech. This game is sandwiched between trips to Navy and UTSA.

UPSET GAME — AUG. 30 AT LOUISIANA

Scott Abell can introduce himself to FBS football with a season opening win at Louisiana, a G6 program that’s posted double-digit wins in four of its last six seasons. Louisiana won’t have any game film on Rice’s new-look option attack and that could be to the Owls’ advantage.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING 6-6

Reaching a bowl game and entering the postseason with a chance to post a winning record for the first time in over 10 years would represent a massive success in Year 1 for Scott Abell. Maybe the Owls can shock-and-awe their way to a bowl game with their version of the option.

FLOOR 1-11

The only sure-fire win on the schedule is at home in Week 3 against Prairie View A&M. Every other game is a coin-flip at best for an Owls team undergoing a massive change in philosophy with mostly the same cast of players. Scott Abell & Co. might need a full offseason to implement the change.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 31	Sam Houston	L, 34-14	Oct. 26	at UConn	L, 17-10
Sept. 7	Texas Southern	W, 69-7	Nov. 2	Navy	W, 24-10
Sept. 14	at Houston	L, 33-7	Nov. 8	at Memphis	L, 27-20
Sept. 21	at Army	L, 37-14	Nov. 23	at UAB	L, 40-14
Sept. 28	Charlotte	L, 21-20	Nov. 30	South Florida	W, 35-28
Oct. 12	UTSA	W, 29-27			
Oct. 19	at Tulane	L, 24-10			

Record: 4-8 (3-5)

DC
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TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
RICE OWLS

Three **GEMS****RB D'ANDRE HARDEMAN JR.**

A key weapon on North Shore's star-studded squad, Hardeman combines blazing speed with sharp change-of-direction skills to create explosive plays. His elite acceleration makes him a constant home-run threat. Despite heavy interest, Rice won a hotly contested recruitment for one of Texas' most electric playmakers, adding instant juice to the offense.

OL COLTER ALBERDING

Alberding is a physical mauler who dominated at tackle but will now move inside. Underrated due to measurables, he's a pancake machine who plays with a mean streak. His film vs. Prosper — where he logged 11 pancakes — shows just how nasty he can be. Intensity like this wins in the trenches.

RB TYVONN BYARS

Byars is a workhorse back with bruising strength and sneaky top-end speed. The Houston-area standout has been ultra-productive and shines in short-yardage. He's the kind of back who churns out consistent yards and wears down defenses. Rice fans looking for grit and grind in the backfield will love him.

DC
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TEXAS FOOTBALLCOLLEGE
RICE OWLSTyvonn **BYARS**the **EXPERT'S TAKE**RECRUITING
GRADE**C-**

Rice hit the reset button this cycle, ushering in the Scott Abell era with a fresh offensive identity centered on a modern option-style attack. What set Abell apart early was his decision to honor every commitment made to the previous staff—a move that earned respect across the board. Recruiting at Rice comes with academic hurdles, but the staff managed to sign 22 who meet the program's high bar. Due to academic restrictions, the transfer portal is used more selectively, especially at premium positions like quarterback and offensive line, where plug-and-play talent can immediately raise the program's floor.

2024 RECRUITING CLASS**HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE** (247Sports Rank: 126th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Luca Akirtava.....	DL	6-2	250	Frisco Reedy
Colter Alberding.....	OL	6-3	295	Allen
Michael Amey III.....	DB	5-11	180	Fort Bend Hightower
Keenan Arcega-Whiteside.....	WR	6-3	190	Dorman (S.C.)
Braden Bays.....	DL	6-3	250	Boerne
Erben Birkhoff.....	OL	6-3	285	Katy Tompkins
Ian Bothwell.....	OL	6-4	320	Fort Worth All Saints
Tyvonn Byars.....	RB	5-10	210	Montgomery Lake Creek
Jordan Clark.....	WR	5-11	180	Manor
Patrick Crayton Jr.....	QB	6-1	195	Hebron
D'Andre Hardeman Jr.....	RB	5-8	190	North Shore
DeReyon Jenkins Jr.....	Edge	6-4	210	Pope John Paul II Catholic (La.)
Colin Leahey.....	RB	5-11	190	Magnolia
Payton Matthews.....	WR	5-11	175	San Antonio Harlan
Justin Michaelis.....	OL	6-4	290	Park City (Utah)
Ahram Oghor.....	WR	5-10	195	Spring
Semaj Pierre.....	WR	5-8	160	Port Arthur Memorial
Cole Principe.....	OL	6-3	260	Orange Lutheran (Calif.)
Robert Rooks.....	DL	6-1	260	St Vincent De Paul (Calif.)
Will Swartz.....	TE	6-4	235	Huffman Hargrave
Ty Thames.....	LB	6-3	195	Wimberley
CJ Witten.....	LB	6-1	215	Argyle Liberty Christian

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 146th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Chase Allen.....	K	6-2	195	UTSA
Matthew Aribisala.....	DT	6-3	295	Sam Houston
Max Balthazar.....	RB	5-11	205	Coastal Carolina
VJ Bronson.....	DT	6-3, 309		North Texas
Artis Cole.....	WR	6-0	190	Louisiana-Monroe
Jack Kane.....	S	5-10	184	Oregon State
Max Lofy.....	CB	5-10	190	Wisconsin
Carson Morgan.....	RB	6-0	210	Kansas
Lucas Scheerhorn.....	QB	6-1	190	Kennesaw State
Sean Sullivan.....	OL	6-5	305	Yale
Aaron Turner.....	RB	5-8	185	Cincinnati

UNDER THE RADAR**LB TY THAMES**

A rangy defender with great instincts, Thames is always around the ball. Known for his physicality at Wimberley, he plays downhill and hits hard. Once he bulks up, his frame suggests huge upside. He's a classic developmental pickup—high football IQ, great frame, and an explosive motor.

Here loading
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who love the game.



BY MIKE CRAVEN

ROADRUNNERS EYE AAC TITLE
AFTER RESET AND RENEWED URGENCY

No college football team in Texas boasts more wins than UTSA's 46 since the start of the decade, which coincides with the arrival of head coach Jeff Traylor in 2020. The Roadrunners won 41 games in their first eight years of existence. They've won 39 over the last four, including a pair of Conference USA championships, a trip to the AAC title game, and five straight bowl appearances.

But 2024 didn't live up to the standard, and it seemingly reignited something the Roadrunners had lost in all that success. Walk around the UTSA facilities this offseason and there was a sense of urgency. Of frustration. The seven wins last year tied for the lowest mark since Traylor's first season. The low point was a 46-45 road loss to Tulsa that dropped the team to 3-5 with Memphis, North Texas, and Army still ahead.

Traylor's UTSA built a reputation on winning close games, playing physically, and limiting mistakes. The 2024 version was the opposite. They committed too many penalties and created too few turnovers. The defense became one of the worst in the AAC, and the offense struggled early while quarterback Owen McCown found his rhythm.

Transitioning from the Frank Harris era was always going to be a challenge. Traylor doesn't blame his roster, however. He puts the responsibility on himself after some soul-searching in the offseason.

"When we got here, we were just a bunch of hungry-ass dogs," Traylor said. "I didn't give a shit what everybody said. We were just physical, tough. We played hard. We're still tough and physical, but we were just undisciplined, in my opinion, and that's nobody's fault but mine."

The loss at Tulsa was the worst of the Traylor era. A week later, the Roadrunners beat a ranked team for the first time in program history in an eight-point win over Memphis at home. They're 29-3 at the Alamodome under Traylor heading into 2025. One of those losses came to Houston in multiple overtimes. The other two were to Army. UTSA won four of its last five games to reach a bowl and salvage the season.

Expectations return to the Alamo City in 2025 because of the offense. McCown became one of the best quarterbacks in the G6 by season's end, and his family's long-standing relationship with Traylor traces back to East Texas basketball gyms when Traylor coached his father and uncles. The Roadrunners also return most of their top offensive linemen, their leading rusher, a trio of

young, talented wide receivers, and the best tight end room in the AAC.

"Last year, we expected our defense to carry us while our offense figured it out, and that didn't end up happening," Traylor said. "With all that we have returning on the offensive side of the ball, including our quarterback, we expect to be good over there. Our defense is kind of like our offense last year — we like the talent, but it's unproven."

Traylor returned to his roots as a coach, and UTSA could be better for it. He's keeping things simple and hoping that a return to the basics propels a talented roster back into conference title contention. The winner of the AAC will always be in the playoff conversation, after all. The Roadrunners might not be as talented as they were during their title runs, but that's true across the G6 due to the transfer portal.

"If we don't do anything else well, we're going to line up correctly and do our job without a bunch of dumb mistakes," Traylor said. "The talent is so even across the board at our level, so the disciplined teams win. We were that team for three years. We aim to be again."

Owen McCown and a talented group of skill position players give the Roadrunners hope that they can return to conference contention in 2025. Playmakers such as wide receiver David Amador II, tight end Houston Thomas, and running back Robert Henry Jr., ensure UTSA will be one of the top scoring offenses in the G6.

Returning to form on the defensive side of the ball will make or break the Roadrunners' season. They must improve while replacing stalwarts such as defensive tackles Joe Evans and Brandon Brown and linebacker Jamal Ligon, as well as cornerback Zah Frazier and leading sacker Jimmori Robinson.

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Shad BANKS

The transfer from TCU should be a boost for the UTSA defense after notching 114 tackles in 42 career games dating back to 2021.

Photo Credit: UTSA Athletics

THE OFFENSE

Junior quarterback Owen McCown (3,424 passing yards, 25 TDs, 10 INTs) returns to lead a Roadrunner offense poised to be one of the best in the G6. He threw for over 250 yards in eight games and added 340 rushing yards and three scores on the ground.

As McCown improved as a first-year starter, so did UTSA's fortunes in the second half of the season. Retaining him during the transfer portal era was a huge win for Jeff Traylor's program. Traylor has known the McCown family for decades, having coached Owen's dad and uncles in high school.

"You can coach him really hard and get after him, so he's a tough kid," Traylor said. "He's not as vocal as Frank (Harris), but they're similar in their mental toughness and resolve. They just have a willpower that I think all great people do."

UTSA lost two of its top three running backs to the portal: Kevorian Barnes (TCU) and Brandon High (Cal). Assistant coach Julian Griffin also departed. Robert Henry (706 rushing yards, 7 TDs) returns as the starter after receiving an extra year of eligibility as a former JUCO player. Other backs to watch include junior Bryson Donnell and redshirt freshman Will Henderson III.

A deep and experienced offensive line should help the Roadrunners regain form in the run game. Left tackle Kamar Missouri and right tackle Jaylen Garth return. Guards Venly Tatafu and Cody Godinet are coming off surgery, and their health could bolster the interior. If unavailable, transfers Darrell Jones (Bowie State) and Trevor Timmons (Georgia State) are next up.

Center is the only real question. Ben Rios and Luke Lapeze are battling for the starting spot. Lapeze was expected to start last year before a major injury. If healthy, Traylor believes he has close to 10 linemen he can win with.

"We're healthy, and we just need to stay that way up front," Traylor said. "One of the main reasons we were better in the second half of last season was because we were able to start the same group up front for a few games in a row."

McCown won't lack reliable targets. Devin McCuin led the team in receptions last year with 45. Tight ends Houston Thomas and Patrick Overmyer combined for 65 catches, 733 yards, and six touchdowns. Wide receiver David Amador II logged 31 catches for 376 yards over five games. Willie McCoy is a weapon when healthy.

"Everybody is back on offense, and we're holding an extra big chip on our shoulder because we were better than our record indicated," McCown said. "We all made a pact to stick around and see how much we can accomplish together. A lot of us had a chance to leave, but we think we can be special."

BY THE NUMBERS

33.2 – UTSA averaged the 27th-most points per game last season, peaking late in the year when quarterback Owen McCown found his groove with a budding group of receivers.

25 – That's the number of 40-plus yard plays for UTSA in 2024, tied for best in the nation with East Carolina and Louisville.

85 – The Roadrunners ranked 116 out of 134 teams in tackles for loss allowed. Those 85 TFLs accounted for 310 yards lost.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Owen McCown is the clear starter at quarterback. Who his backup will be in 2025 is murkier. Former backup Eddie Lee Marburger transferred to UTRGV this offseason to be the first starting quarterback for the Vaqueros. Traylor said redshirt sophomore Brandon Tennison had the leg up in the competition for QB2 because of his familiarity in the system. The other two quarterbacks in the mix are redshirt freshman Noah Lugo, who transferred to UTSA from BYU, and true freshman Max Gerlich, a 2025 signee from Austin Anderson. Not one of those three options has appeared in a college football game.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

RB A'MARION PETERSON

The Roadrunners added the USC transfer in the spring portal window after losing Brandon High to Cal. Peterson is a Texas native who played in 10 games last year for the Trojans, earning his first collegiate start in the Las Vegas Bowl versus Texas A&M. UTSA starts 2025 against the Aggies.

WR AJ WILSON

A Houston Christian transfer who was second-team All-Southland after catching 29 passes for 825 yards and eight touchdowns in 2024. He averaged 28.45 yards a catch. Wilson is a Huntsville native who should carve out a role for himself in a crowded wide receiver room.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#13 **Owen McCown**
QB

6-1, 190, JR.
RUSK

#20 **Robert Henry Jr.**
RB

5-10, 205, SR.
LUMBERTON, MISS.

#19 **Willie McCoy**
WR

6-0, 185, SR.
BELLAIRE

#14 **Devin McCuin**
WR

6-0, 195, JR.
JACKSONVILLE

#18 **David Amador II**
WR

6-0, 195, SO.
GALENA PARK

#88 **Houston Thomas**
TE

6-5, 240, JR.
COLLEGE STATION

#55 **Kamar Missouri**
LT

6-6, 305, SR.
BALTIMORE, MD.

#75 **Venly Tatafu**
LG

6-4, 345, SR.
PORTLAND, ORE.

#57 **Ben Rios**
C

6-6, 295, JR.
SAN ANTONIO

#53 **Cody Godinet**
RG

6-4, 345, SR.
LEONE, AMERICA SAMOA

#71 **Jaylen Garth**
RT

6-6, 320, SR.
PORT NECHES

Jaffer Murphy
K

6-1, 185, SR.
MARION, IOWA

THE DEFENSE

UTSA ranked 103rd in scoring defense last year, allowing 30.1 points per game. None of the previous four defenses under Jeff Traylor had ranked outside the top 60 or allowed more than 25.9 points per game. In their six losses, the Roadrunners gave up a staggering 39.8 points per game, including 49 to Texas State and 46 to Tulsa—two of the worst losses since Traylor arrived in 2020.

“We lost some leaders from the year before like Rashad (Wisdom), and then guys like Joe (Evans) went down early with injury. That really hurt us,” Traylor said. “We cut down on bad penalties in the second half, but early in the season, our lack of discipline was terrible. We were talented. We were not disciplined.”

UTSA returns the seventh-most offensive production in the FBS but ranks just 89th in returning defensive production, per ESPN, with 49% returning. They’ll need to improve defensively while replacing stalwarts like Brandon Brown, Jamal Ligon, Donyai Taylor, and Zah Frazier, the lone UTSA player selected in the 2025 NFL Draft.

The transfer portal is a double-edged sword for G6 coaches. Yes, top players are poached by bigger programs, but the portal also allows for quick roster turnover. UTSA used it to reload defensively with FCS standouts and former Power Four recruits seeking more playing time.

The Roadrunners added key pieces like Cameron Blaylock (Tennessee State) and Kaian Roberts-Day (Baylor) up front. Shad Banks Jr. (TCU) and Brandon Tucker (East Texas A&M) are competing for linebacker roles. The secondary was bolstered with Kaden Meier (Nevada), Cam Upshaw Jr. (Memphis), and RJ Lester (Oklahoma State). UCF transfers Jashad Presley (LB) and Brandon Jacob (S) joined in May.

Familiar faces remain part of the plan. Vic Shaw and Nnanna Anyanwu are expected to replace Jimmori Robinson’s edge production. Chidera Otutu and Jameian “Big Baby” Buxton ended spring as the top nose tackles. Tai Leonard and Jon Jones were running with the starters at defensive end.

Davin Martin stood out most at cornerback during the spring. Meier and redshirt sophomore Jakevian Rogers are also in the mix. UTSA ranked 124th in passing defense last year despite having an NFL draft pick at corner. Owen Pewee is expected to have a breakout season at nickel, a position the Roadrunners call “Money.”

Tyan Milton is projected to start at one safety spot, with Elijah Newell and Jimmy Wyrick battling for the other. Kenyan Kelly and Cam Upshaw are also names to watch at safety.

Where Legends Begin

BY THE

NUMBERS

30.1 – That’s the number of points allowed by the UTSA defense last season, ranking 103rd nationally in scoring defense. The Roadrunners hadn’t ranked outside the top 60 in the Jeff Traylor era.

39 – Only two teams – Ball State and Oklahoma State – allowed more 30-plus yard plays from scrimmage than the Roadrunners.

85 – UTSA was 116th in the FBS in tackles for loss as the Roadrunners struggled to cause havoc in the backfield against the run despite recording 42 sacks.

KEEP AN EYE ON

UTSA was one of only two teams in college football to commit over 1,000 yards of penalties on the season and many of those were backbreaking mental errors on the defensive side of the ball. Routinely, the Roadrunners allowed the opponent’s drives to continue on third down and in the red zone because of unforced errors. UTSA allowed 42 first downs due to penalties, which was six more than any other team. The 113 total penalties were also the second worst in the country. Discipline was the buzz word in the Alamo City all offseason.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

OLB NNANNA ANYANWU

UTSA believes the redshirt sophomore could be the next great edge rusher for the Roadrunners. He was poised for a breakout season last year before a preseason injury sidelined him for the season. He also missed most of 2023 because of an injury.

DL JOHNNY BOWENS III

Bowens was a four-star recruit when he left nearby Converse Judson to start his college career at Oregon. He transferred back home ahead of 2024 but a season-ending injury in camp kept him from making an impact last season. He might be UTSA’s most talented lineman.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#46 **Mike Williams Jr.**
DE

6-5, 265, JR.
NOCATEE, FLA.

#98 **Jameian Buxton**
NT

6-1, 325, JR.
NEW ORLEANS, LA.

#35 **Jon Jones**
DT

6-4, 255, SR.
MCKINNEY

#31 **Vic Shaw**
WLB

6-3, 235, SO.
TEXARKANA

#40 **Brandon Tucker**
JCK

5-11, 225, JR.
DESOTO

#17 **Shad Banks Jr.**
MLB

6-1, 245, SR.
GALENA PARK

#9 **Owen Pewee**
MNY

6-2, 205, JR.
CYPRESS

#30 **Davin Martin**
CB

6-3, 175, SO.
KLEIN

#28 **Kaden Meier**
CB

6-0, 190, JR.
WOLFFORTH

#22 **Elijah Newell**
SS

5-10, 180, R-FR.
MAUMELLE, ARK.

#15 **Tyan Milton**
FS

5-11, 185, SR.
LAWRENCEVILLE, GA.

#25 **Calle Hogan**
P

6-0, 215, SR.
ELTHAM NORTH, AUSTRALIA

DC
TXDave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALLCOLLEGE
UTSA ROADRUNNERS

SCHEDULE & PREDICTIONS

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS
FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

“Coaching wise, it’s like the mafia over there, man. They’re all so close and they know what they like. Jeff (Traylor) is such a good coach. He just has that place rolling. He’s a perfect fit there and they have such a great culture. That group just plays its ass off no matter what’s on the roster and that’s not as easy as it sounds.”

“We keep rooting for (Traylor) to get one of those Power Four jobs he’s looked at because that’d make our life a lot easier. Last year, they didn’t play like one of his previous teams early on in the season. A lot of mistakes and undisciplined stuff that is out of character, but they figured it out. Good coaches usually do. That offense this year is nasty. Could be one of his best. Jeff probably doesn’t get enough credit for how good he is at building offenses. That’s why they can turn over the OC and keep scoring points.”



Owen McCown

Photo Credit: Yashawn Neeman/UTSA Athletics

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 30	at Texas A&M	L	Oct. 30	Tulane	L
Sept. 6	Texas State	W	Nov. 6	at South Florida	W
Sept. 13	UIW	W	Nov. 15	at Charlotte	W
Sept. 20	at Colorado State	W	Nov. 22	East Carolina	W
Oct. 4	at Temple	W	Nov. 29	Army	L
Oct. 11	Rice	W			
Oct. 18	at North Texas	L			

Record: 8-4 (5-3)

BIGGEST GAME — SEPT. 6 VS. TEXAS STATE

UTSA lost to its I-35 rivals in San Marcos for the first time in program history in a blowout that didn’t live up to preseason hype. Lose again to the Bobcats and UTSA will start 0-2 on the season because the opener is at Texas A&M.

TRAP GAME — OCT. 4 AT TEMPLE

Former Sam Houston head coach K.C. Keeler should help the Temple Owls leave the cellar of the AAC and an upset of the Roadrunners would be a signature win to build momentum. UTSA struggled on the road, especially early in the season last year.

UPSET GAME — NOV. 29 VS. ARMY

Jeff Traylor is 29-3 at the Alamodome as head coach of UTSA, but two of those losses are to Army. In fact, the Black Knights have knocked off the Roadrunners in three of four meetings since Traylor took over the Roadrunners. This game could have AAC championship game stakes.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING: 11-1

UTSA could beat every team on the schedule except for the season opener at Texas A&M. The Roadrunners return arguably the best quarterback in G6 with Owen McCown and they built momentum in the second half of 2024. The defense must improve and the team needs more consistency on the road.

FLOOR: 6-6

If the Roadrunners don’t improve defensively or on the road, they’ll again be fighting through the end of the season to reach bowl eligibility. UTSA lost a ton of leadership and experience on the defensive side of the ball and the margins are smaller and smaller in the G6 ranks.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 31	Kennesaw State	W, 28-16	Oct. 26	at Tulsa	L, 46-45
Sept. 7	at Texas State	L, 49-10	Nov. 2	Memphis	W, 44-36
Sept. 14	at Texas	L, 56-7	Nov. 15	North Texas	W, 48-27
Sept. 21	Houston Christian	W, 45-7	Nov. 22	Temple	W, 51-27
Sept. 28	at East Carolina	L, 30-20	Nov. 30	at Army	L, 29-24
Oct. 12	at Rice	L, 29-27	Dec. 23	Coastal Carolina (Bowl)	W, 44-15
Oct. 19	Florida Atlantic	W, 38-24			

Record: 7-6 (4-4)

UTX

TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
UTSA ROADRUNNERS

Three **GEMS**

KINGSTON JONES

Jones is a highly athletic wide receiver from Louisiana with a strong track background, including a state title in the 100 meters (10.68). He helped his team win three district championships and is known for his explosiveness. Jones has the potential to develop into a game-changing weapon in San Antonio.

COREY WALLS

Walls is an explosive interior defensive lineman who lives in the backfield. With fast hands and quicker feet, he's tough to block and brings edge-rusher moves to the interior. Playing at 9-6A powerhouse Sachse, he consistently beat the snap. Once he adds strength, he'll be tough to keep off the field.

TY RUPE

Rupe is a towering, physical tight end who moves like a smaller athlete and blocks like an extra tackle. He's built to handle every-down duties and has the hands to impact the passing game. Injuries slowed him some in high school, but his frame and ceiling scream long-term contributor.

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Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
UTSA ROADRUNNERS



Photo Credit: Greg Powers

RECRUITING BREAKDOWN

the **EXPERT'S TAKE**

RECRUITING
GRADE

B-

DCTF RECRUITING ANALYST GREG POWERS

Jeff Traylor and UTSA adjusted their recruiting approach in response to college football's evolving landscape. The 2024 class is a diverse blend, mixing high school signees, junior college talent and transfers. Only 10 high school prospects were signed, with just five coming from Texas—marking a noticeable shift from past classes that leaned heavily in-state. UTSA proved it can recruit nationally, pulling high school signees from four different states. While the Texas high school footprint shrank slightly, the Roadrunners clearly prioritized filling needs with experience and versatility, which keeps them on pace in the AAC.

2025 RECRUITING CLASS

HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE (247Sports Rank: 86th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
TJ Andrews	RB	6-1	195	U.S. Military Academy Prep (NY)
A'Marion Breland	OL	6-7	285	Hattiesburg (MS)
Isaiah Butler-Tanner	TE	6-5	245	Killeen Shoemaker
Max Gerlich	QB	6-3	190	Austin Anderson
Aden Hall	LB	6-0	195	First Academy (FL)
Kingston Jones	WR	6-0	170	John F. Kennedy (LA)
Zion Jones	DB	5-10	175	Katy Jordan
King Justice	DL	6-1	285	Port Charlotte (FL)
Anthony Pinnace	DB	6-0	170	Iowa Western C.C.
Mark Rayson III	DB	6-1	205	Dallas First Baptist
Armoni Rue	DB	5-11	175	Highland C.C. (KS)
Ty Rupe	TE	6-7	245	Conroe Grand Oaks
Jon Stephens	LS	6-3	220	Katy
Corey Walls	DL	6-2	260	Sachse
Darion White	LB	6-2	220	Tyler J.C.
Mickel Williams	DL	6-5	265	Hutchinson C.C. (KS)

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 91st)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Shad Banks Jr.	LB	6-1	240	TCU
Cameron Blaylock	DT	6-2	315	Tennessee State
Darrell Jones	IOL	6-4	355	Bowie State
Jaylan Jones	DL	6-1	265	UTRGV
Brandon Jacob	S	6-1	192	UCF
RJ Lester	CB	6-3	185	Oklahoma State
Noah Lugo	QB	6-2	195	BYU
Kaden Meier	CB	6-1	200	Nevada
Don Munnerlyn	EDGE	6-5	230	Toledo
Jaffer Murphy	K	6-1	185	North Carolina
A'Marion Peterson	RB	6-0	217	USC
Jashad Presley	LB	6-2	220	UCF
Kaia Roberts-Day	Edge	6-3	275	Baylor
Jaalen Smith	WR	6-2	190	Michigan State
Trevor Timmons	IOL	6-2	285	Georgia State
Brandon Tucker	LB	5-10	225	East Texas A&M
Cam Upshaw Jr.	S	6-3	185	Memphis
Devron Williams Jr.	IOL	6-3	320	Louisiana
AJ Wilson	WR	6-2	185	Houston Christian
John Emery Jr.	RB	6-0	220	LSU

UNDER THE RADAR

MAX GERLICH

Gerlich bounced back from a tough junior year to post a big senior campaign, flashing calm under pressure and sharp decision-making. With prototypical size and a smooth release, he fits UTSA's mold of steady, efficient quarterbacks. His long-term upside makes him a potential starter and strong developmental play for the Roadrunners.

BY CARTER YATES

SUN BELT DELIVERS STARS, STORIES, AND SECOND CHANCES

College football's future stars start in the Sun Belt.

Last year, former James Madison head coach Curt Cignetti took 13 Dukes players to Indiana and shocked the world with a College Football Playoff berth. Troy's own Jon Sumrall led Tulane to the American Athletic Conference Championship. Further back, Eli Drinkwitz coached Appalachian State to a 12-1 record in his first season, then turned Missouri into a Top 25 program.

The Sun Belt is the last launching pad for young coaches and, in the Transfer Portal age, players. Watch this league, and you'll know the backstory when SBC alums suddenly show up on primetime.

That may be a consolation prize to fans tired of watching new rosters every fall. But the churn is a testament to the Sun Belt's quality. No football-playing program has left since the 2013 realignment, and it's one of two G6 leagues (with the MAC) still maintaining a clear regional footprint.

Texas State (8-5, 5-3) spurning the Mountain West's offer — and holding off on the Pac-12, for now — speaks to the Sun Belt's appeal. The Bobcats are considered a sleeping giant. They're starting to awaken under Coach GJ Kinne, who's delivered back-to-back bowl wins for the first time in school history and oversaw the Sun Belt's top-scoring offense in 2023 and 2024.

James Madison (9-4, 5-1) is the preseason championship favorite. Coach Bobby Chesney reunites with quarterback Matthew Sluka from their Holy Cross days. Sluka made national news by leaving UNLV mid-season, claiming NIL commitments weren't fulfilled. He'll make headlines for his play in 2025.

It's also Sun Belt Championship or bust for **Georgia Southern (8-5, 6-2)**, though coach Clay Helton earned a contract extension through 2029 before the make-or-break year. The roster is fully Helton's entering Year 4, including quarterback JC French (2,831 yards, 17 TDs, 11 INTs) and All-Sun Belt Second-Team DB Chance Gamble.

Old Dominion (5-7, 4-4) coach Ricky Rahne also has a prove-it season ahead. His Monarchs haven't posted a winning record in four years. They led the Sun Belt in rushing last year, with dual-threat QB Colton Joseph taking over mid-season.

Butch Jones earned his first winning season in Year 4 at **Arkansas State (8-5, 5-3)**. WR Corey Rucker (69 catches, 1,059 yards) is a game-breaker. New defensive coordinator Griff McCauley must

SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI QB BRAYLON BRAXTON (FRISCO INDEPENDENCE) Braxton revived his career at Marshall, going 8-0 as a starter for the Sun Belt champs with 19 scores.

ARKANSAS STATE DE DEMARCUS HENDRICKS (SAN ANTONIO WAGNER) Hendricks is an exciting newcomer for Arkansas State in 2025 after leading Texas A&M-Kingsville with 15 tackles for loss and 7.5 sacks.

COASTAL CAROLINA IOL HESTON EDWARDS (HASLET EATON) Edwards rotated as a starter between guard and center in his first season at Coastal Carolina.

TROY TROJANS CB KALENO LEVINE (HASLET EATON) The Missouri State transfer posted 50 tackles and six pass breakups before the JUCO rule granted him an extra year of eligibility.

LOUISIANA WR ROBERT WILLIAMS (CEDAR HILL TLC) Williams had 26 catches for 290 yards and a score last season and should be in line for a bigger role in 2025.



Braylon BRAXTON
After winning Sun Belt Newcomer of the Year at Marshall, the former Frisco Independence star made the cross-conference move to Southern Miss.

improve a unit that gave up 32.2 points per game.

Marshall (10-3, 7-1) won the Sun Belt but couldn't field a bowl team after coach Charles Huff left for **Southern Miss (1-11, 0-8)**, taking nearly 20 players with him. Looking ahead, Marshall is a mystery because Southern Miss now has the Herd's best players — including Sun Belt Newcomer of the Year Braylon Braxton. Makes sense?

Marshall won the title, but **Appalachian State (5-6, 3-5)** was picked to — and instead posted its first losing season since 2013. Former South Carolina QB coach Dowell Loggains takes over, bringing NFL experience from five pro teams between 2010–20.

Louisiana (10-4, 7-1) and **South Alabama (7-6, 5-3)** face uncertainty at quarterback. Louisiana's Coach of the Year Michael Desormeaux turns to former four-star Walker Howard, but the roster is rebuilding around him. Former Texas QB Major Applewhite must replace Gio Lopez after a spring transfer. Second-Team All-Sun Belt LB Blayne Myrick leads the defense.

Coastal Carolina (6-7, 3-5) had its first losing season since 2019 but kept spirits up by offering unlimited free concessions at games in 2025. The Chanticleers have only outdrawn **ULM (5-7, 3-5)** in attendance over the past five years. Bryan Vincent started 5-1 in his ULM debut before

dropping six straight.

Troy (4-8, 3-5) and **Georgia State (3-9, 1-7)** also hope for second-year turnarounds. Gerard Parker's Trojans came back to earth after two straight double-digit win seasons, while Dell McGee's three-win debut was the program's lowest since 2018.

Three KEY GAMES

TEXAS STATE VS JAMES MADISON, OCTOBER 28

This Tuesday night game between two SBC championship contenders with rising head coaching stars should get stand-alone TV treatment.

APPALACHIAN STATE VS GEORGIA SOUTHERN, NOVEMBER 6:

One of the SBC's best rivalries gets an early November slot, which should provide plenty of championship game implications.

LOUISIANA VS MARSHALL, SEPTEMBER 27

A rematch of the SBC Championship to open conference play shows how different Marshall will look with new coach Tony Gibson.

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Photo Credit: USM Athletics

DC TX

TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
SUN BELT



BY MIKE CRAVEN

BOBCATS BUILD A NEW STANDARD UNDER G.J. KINNE

Expectations change as quickly as rosters in modern college football. Texas State didn't win eight games in a single season over the Bobcats' first 11 years as an FBS program. G.J. Kinne has reached that mark twice in two years in San Marcos.

The first time was celebrated like a Super Bowl. But last year, it felt more like a disappointment. That's because Texas State entered the year with a stacked roster and hopes of winning the Sun Belt and contending for the G6 spot in the College Football Playoff.

"We beat UTSA and North Texas in the same season, and I would think most years that would be celebrated like the best year ever, but for us last year, it wasn't," Kinne said. "I think that's a good problem to have. It means we've had success and our fans want more. So do we."

The next step is a Sun Belt championship. Texas State only posted one winning record in conference play before Kinne's arrival, and that was back in 2014 under Dennis Franchione. The Bobcats finished 5-3 in the Sun Belt last season to match that mark from 2014. Kinne enters Year 3 at Texas State with a 16-10 overall record and a 9-7 mark against conference foes.

To climb the mountaintop and compete alongside Louisiana and Troy in the West Division, Texas State must rely on a roster decimated by the transfer portal. The offense lost running back Ish Mahdi to Arizona, wide receiver Kole Wilson to Baylor, and left tackle Alex Harkey to Oregon. On the defensive line alone, the Bobcats lost Dominique Ratcliff to Indiana, Terry Webb to SMU, Ben Bell to Virginia Tech, and Tavian Coleman to Colorado.

"The portal was not kind to us," Kinne said. "But at the end of the day, the culture and what we're building here is what will win us games. I would say this has been the most enjoyable team I've had here. I can't predict how many games we'll win, but going out there to practice has been fun."

The Kinne era began with a bang. His first game as a head coach at the FBS level was a trip to Baylor to face the heavily favored Bears. The Bobcats left with a 42-31 victory and the headache of every fan base and media personality in the state wondering where Kinne would coach next. Heck, most of the Baylor fan base would've hired him on the spot and never let him drive back to San Marcos to celebrate.

But while the college football world contemplated Kinne's next move, he concentrated

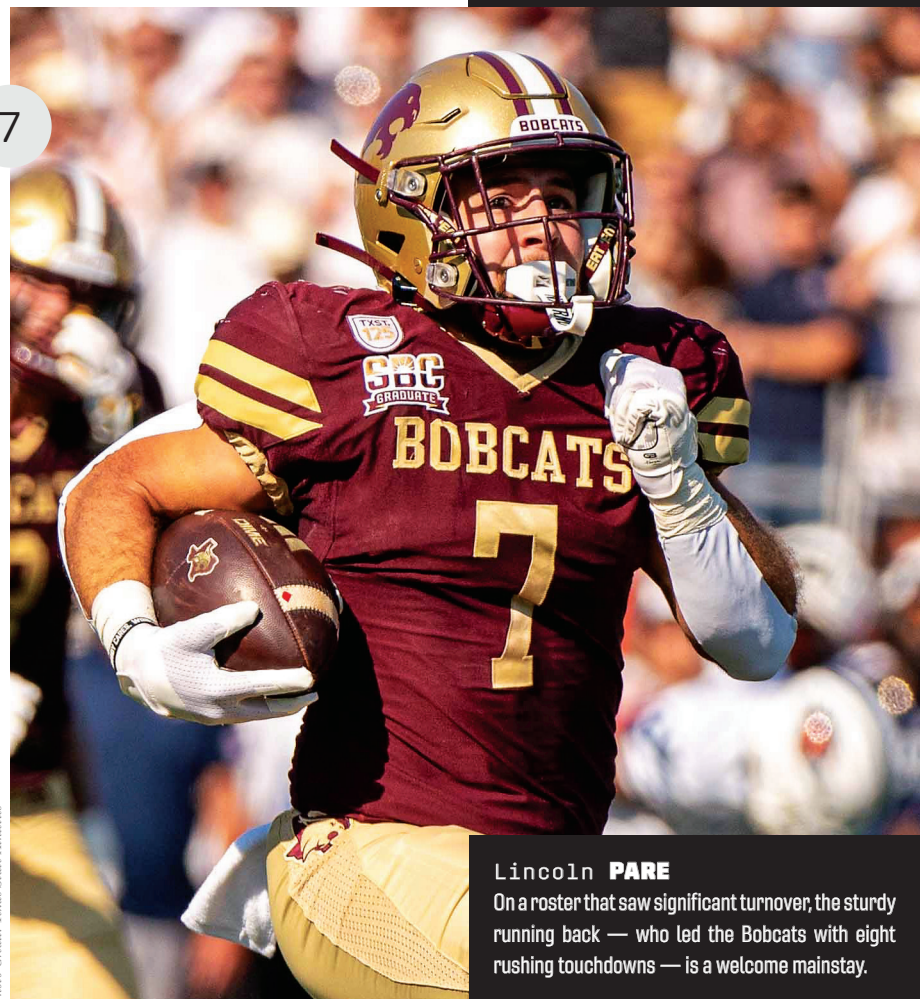
on where his feet were. Few expected he'd still be at Texas State for Year 3, but the signs were there that he intended to lay a foundation of success at Texas State — just like his mentor Jeff Traylor has done at rival UTSA. Kinne received plenty of attention for overturning the roster in Year 1 with a herd of transfers, but he quietly recruited the high school ranks the last two cycles to build a roster meant to last.

"It can be frustrating because our goal was never to go win a bunch early and then bail," Kinne said. "We're building this thing to last. Obviously, it is nice for people to think highly of you and all that, but I'm a Texas guy. Like, going to Purdue doesn't fire me up, you know? I always point to Scott Frost at UCF. Like, no one tells you when you're climbing the ladder of success to stop when you're happy."

Happiness for a head coach and a fan base in college football is measured in wins. For better or worse, Kinne has re-established expectations in San Marcos and awoken a sleeping giant — one with major aspirations in and out of the Sun Belt. His first two years raised the floor. In 2025, Texas State hopes to raise the ceiling.

Texas State perfectly illustrates how expectations alter perception in college football. The Bobcats and head coach G.J. Kinne were celebrated after winning eight games, including the bowl, in 2023 — his first season in charge. They repeated that same success in 2024, but it felt like a disappointment considering the lofty expectations in San Marcos entering the season.

A roster flip was required after 2024 as the Bobcats lost most of their best players to the transfer portal or graduation. That's life as a G6 program. A run at the Sun Belt West championship isn't off the table.



Lincoln **PARE**

On a roster that saw significant turnover, the sturdy running back — who led the Bobcats with eight rushing touchdowns — is a welcome mainstay.

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THE OFFENSE

Texas State lost offensive coordinator Mack Leftwich to Texas Tech after the Bobcats finished seventh in scoring offense (36.5 points per game) and fifth in total offense (476.9 yards per game) in 2024. They've finished in the top 11 of scoring offenses in both years under head coach G.J. Kinne, who doesn't expect fans to notice a drastic change in philosophy — outside of tweaks to match the roster's strengths.

Kinne promoted assistant wide receivers coach Landon Keopple to offensive coordinator in the offseason. The two also worked together at Hawaii and Incarnate Word. Who calls plays in the fall remains to be seen, but the offensive scheme that helped Kinne reach an FCS semifinal and win 16 games at Texas State is staying put.

"We've been together for a long time, so he knows how I think, what I like, how I operate," Kinne said. "Maybe this is my ego talking, but why would I hire someone trained by someone else when I've already done that? There's something to be said for hiring from within and maintaining continuity."

Texas State must replace its starting quarterback for the third straight season. Transfers Holden Geriner, Nate Yarnell, and Gevani McCoy joined in the spring to compete with returner Brad Jackson. McCoy transferred out after spring ball, and Texas State added SMU transfer Keldric Luster. Fall camp will determine a starter among Jackson, Luster, and Geriner.

The Bobcats also lost their top three receivers from last season, including star Joey Hobert. Chris Dawn Jr. and Beau Sparks, who combined for 62 catches, are back. Kylen Evans exited spring as the third receiver. Blake Smith's return from injury boosts the tight end group, and Kinne hinted at more 12 personnel packages featuring Titus Lyons and Ty Stamey.

The running back room is loaded, led by senior Lincoln Pare, the bowl game MVP who scored eight touchdowns and rushed for 554 yards. Losing Ismail Mahdi to Arizona hurts, but Pare, Jaylen Jenkins, Torrance Burgess Jr., and UNLV transfer Greg Burrell form one of the Sun Belt's top stables.

The offensive line is breaking in new faces at multiple spots. Texas State led the state in rushing last year, but replicating that success without Alex Harkey (Oregon) and Nash Jones won't be easy. Dorion Strawn is the starter at left tackle. Tellek Lockette returns at right guard but could slide to center. Sully Burns, Brock Riker, and transfer Lysander Moeolo are names to know. Emeka Obigbo and Ezra Dotson-Oyetade are also in the mix at guard and center.

BY THE NUMBERS

36.5 – That's how many points Texas State averaged per game last year, which was tied for seventh-best in the FBS with SMU. Only Texas Tech scored more in Texas.

339 – Only Miami registered more first downs on the season than the Bobcats. Texas State averaged over 26 first downs per game.

476.9 – Only four teams averaged more yards per game than Texas State during the eight-win 2024. North Texas was the only in-state school with more.

KEEP AN EYE ON

The Bobcats lack proven depth at wide receiver after losing their top three pass catchers from last year. The staff likes starters Chris Dawn Jr. and Beau Sparks, but there is uncertainty after those two. Texas State turned to the spring transfer portal to reinforce the ranks and add some potential breakout candidates out wide to help what will be a young and inexperienced starting quarterback regardless of who wins the job. Tyrin Smith (Cincinnati), Marvin Anderson (Cal), L.J. Johnson (Texas Tech), and Tiaquelin Mims (Southern Miss) can become instant factors in an offense that's passed the ball 429 times in each of the last two seasons.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

RB GREG BURRELL

A former three-star who arrives from UNLV after rushing 65 times for 366 yards and three touchdowns last season. He topped over 100 yards on 11 carries in a win over Utah Tech early in the season. He'll be the biggest back for Texas State.

QB KELDRIC LUSTER

Texas State added TJ Finley after spring ball in Kinne's first season in charge and that worked out for the Bobcats. Luster was a three-star recruit at McKinney who played in seven games over two years at SMU. He could emerge as the starting quarterback by Week 1.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#8 Brad QB Jackson 6-0, 200, RS-FR. SAN ANTONIO REAGAN	#7 Lincoln RB Pare 5-9, 200, SR. GERMANTOWN, TENN.	#1 Chris WR Dawn Jr. 5-7, 170, JR. MESQUITE HORN	#11 Beau WR Sparks 5-11, 175, JR. EL PASO FRANKLIN
#2 Kylen WR Evans 6-2, 200, SO. FRISCO EMERSON	#16 Blake TE Smith 6-4, 247, JR. SOUTHLAKE CARROLL	#64 Dorion LT Strawn 6-6, 315, SR. ENNIS	#71 Lysander LG Moeolo 6-6, 360, SR. VIATOGI, AMERICAN SAMOA
#51 Brock C Riker 6-4, 290, RS-FR. BROCK	#74 Tellek RG Lockette 6-3, 327, SR. MIAMI, FLA.	#68 Sully RT Burns 6-7, 309, SO.. PLANO	

THE DEFENSE

The plight facing G6 programs in modern college football is best illustrated by the Texas State defensive line. Ben Bell is now at Virginia Tech, though the talented defensive end wasn't a major factor last year as he preserved his redshirt for a shot at Power Four football. Terry Webb is at SMU. Dominique Ratcliff (Indiana) and Tavian Coleman (Colorado) are also gone. Steven Parker ran out of eligibility.

Second-year defensive coordinator Dexter McCoil has his work cut out for him. The Bobcats improved from 114th in scoring defense to 60th in his first season calling plays, chopping off over eight points allowed per game. The 24.5 points per game allowed in 2024 ranked fourth in the Sun Belt behind James Madison, Marshall, and Louisiana — two of which played for the conference title.

"We're a multiple, aggressive defense that dictates an offense and can be versatile in what we do and how we challenge an offense," McCoil said. "I wouldn't put us in a box as a four-man front or a three-man front. We'll run whatever best suits our personnel."

The star up front figures to be Kalil Alexander, a breakout performer in Bell's absence. He started five games and played in all 13, leading the Bobcats with 11 tackles for loss. He added 6.5 sacks, two fumble recoveries, and 39 total tackles. Tymere Jackson, Jo'Laison Landry, and Kenard Snyder will compete for snaps opposite Alexander and help pressure the quarterback.

The top defensive tackles after spring were Kamren Washington, Jordan Sanders, and Michael Nwokocha. Washington transferred from Syracuse, Sanders from Cal Poly. Washington was a reserve last season, posting five tackles (3.5 for loss) in 10 games. A stout interior is key to repeating last year's third-place Sun Belt ranking in run defense.

Michael Boudoin III and Treylin Payne exited spring as the expected starters at linebacker. Both played all 13 games last year, with Payne posting 28 tackles. Transfers Ayden Jones (Prairie View A&M) and Terrence Cooks (TCU, originally Texas) will also push for time.

Secondary battles will continue through summer and fall camp. Jaden Rios, Camden Grogan, and Trez Moore are competing for the two starting cornerback spots. Rios comes from East Texas A&M, Moore from UTEP. Grogan played in 13 games last year with nine tackles and a pass breakup.

Texas State will often have three safeties on the field. Darius Jackson, Bobby Crosby, and Ryan Nolan are expected to lead the unit, though roles weren't finalized after spring. Nolan and Jackson combined for 80 tackles last season. Crosby played in four games due to injury, preserving a year of eligibility.

BY THE

NUMBERS

24.5 – That's how many points per game Texas State allowed last year, which ranks 60th in the FBS. That's over eight points better than 2023.

96 – The Bobcats were one of the most disruptive defenses in the country as they ranked 14th nationally with nearly 100 tackles for loss on the year.

55.8 – Texas State was stingy in the red zone, allowing a touchdown in just over 55% of opponents' trips. That was 45th in FBS.

KEEP AN EYE ON

The Bobcats weren't shy adding to the roster on both sides of the ball in the spring transfer portal window. They don't need all those players to hit, but a handful might dictate the level of success Texas State enjoys in 2025. That's especially true on defense where the program added Power Four defensive linemen Bryce Carter (Virginia), Donterry Russell (Mississippi State), David Abiara (SMU), and J.P. Deeter (Arizona State) in April and May. The Bobcats also added linebacker Ashton Heflin (Marshall) and defensive back D.J. Taylor (Cincinnati) after spring practices ended.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

DE JO'LAISON LANDRY

The sophomore from C.E. King registered 7.5 tackles for loss and 4.5 sacks in 13 games last season. He added five quarterback hurries and two forced fumbles in reserve duty. His role will increase this season and he could emerge as a starter opposite of Kalil Alexander.

CB TREZ MOORE

The former UTEP transfer earned his lone start of the season for the Bobcats in 2024 in the bowl victory over North Texas. He did play in all 13 games and is in the competition to start at cornerback in 2025. Moore recorded two interceptions and four pass breakups last year.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#2 Kalil
DE Alexander
6-3, 225, SR.
CHARLOTTE, N.C.

#8 Kamren
DT Washington
6-2, 290, JR.
MANSFIELD SUMMIT

#88 Jordan
DT Sanders
6-4, 285, JR.
HAWTHORNE, CALIF.

#0 Tymere
DE Jackson Jr.
6-3, 218, RS-FR.
WAXAHACHIE

#29 Treylin
WLB Payne
6-0, 215, SR.
CONVERSE JUDSON

#3 Michael
MLB Boudoin III
6-4, 224, SR.
HAYS

#1 Bobby
NB Crosby
6-2, 190, SR.
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLA.

#11 Camden
CB Grogan
6-3, 175, SR.
BARBERS HILL

#9 Jaden
CB Rios
6-0, 172, SR.
FRISCO LONE STAR

#5 Darius
FS Jackson
6-2, 195, JR.
RED OAK

#14 Ryan
SS Nolan
5-10, 181, JR.
GAINESVILLE, FLA.

#38 David
P Nunez
5-10, 182, SR.
HOUSTON SECOND BAPTIST

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SCHEDULE & PREDICTIONS

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS
FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

"I'm not sure there is a better evaluator of talent at the G6 level than G.J. Most of us at that level would kill for his roster last season and that's a testament to him because it isn't like most of those guys were big time before he got them to San Marcos. The transfer portal killed them, though, and I think losing Mack (Leftwich) is a bigger deal than most probably think it is."

"They probably should have won more games last year, if we're being honest. It's those details that cost you games and that is a young staff. Look at where a lot of their starters are now – that roster was loaded. They were better at the beginning of the season than the end and it takes consistency to break through from seven, eight wins to a conference championship."



Kalil ALEXANDER

Photo Credit: Texas State Athletics

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 30	Eastern Michigan	W	Oct. 28	James Madison	L
Sept. 6	at UTSA	L	Nov. 8	at Louisiana	L
Sept. 13	at Arizona State	L	Nov. 15	at Southern Miss	W
Sept. 20	Nicholls	W	Nov. 22	ULM	W
Oct. 4	at Arkansas State	W	Nov. 29	South Alabama	W
Oct. 11	Troy	W			
Oct. 18	at Marshall	W			

Record: 8-4 (6-2)

BIGGEST GAME — OCT. 28 VS. JAMES MADISON

The Dukes quickly became the top dogs in the Sun Belt and are the preseason favorite again in 2025. With most of the headline games away from San Marcos – UTSA, Arizona State, Louisiana – the James Madison game feels like a chance to make a statement on a Tuesday night.

TRAP GAME — OCT. 18 AT MARSHALL

Sandwiched between marquee home games against Troy and James Madison is a trip to West Virginia to face a Thundering Herd program undergoing a complete reset following Charles Huff's departure. Marshall could struggle in Year 1 under Tony Gibson as he replaces most of his roster.

UPSET GAME — NOV. 8 AT LOUISIANA

Texas State broke a long losing streak against UTSA and Troy in 2024. The Bobcats hope to slay a new beast in 2025 against a Louisiana program that is 11-0 against them since 2013. Texas State lost the last two by a combined 10 points with G.J. Kinne in charge.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING 10-2

A double-digit win season would put Texas State on the doorstep of its first conference championship as an FBS program. The Bobcats were solid on the road in 2024, and they'll need to be again in 2025 with trips to UTSA, Arizona State, Marshall, and Louisiana on the docket.

FLOOR 6-6

Dipping below bowl eligibility is tough to imagine, but a slide backwards from two straight eight-win seasons isn't out of the cards if the Bobcats don't hit on the transfers like they did in the previous two cycles with G.J. Kinne steering the ship. A tough schedule awaits a new cast of players.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 31	Lamar	W, 34-27	Oct. 29	Louisiana	L, 23-17
Sept. 7	UTSA	W, 49-10	Nov. 9	at ULM	W, 38-17
Sept. 12	Arizona State	L, 31-28	Nov. 16	Southern Miss	W, 58-3
Sept. 28	at Sam Houston	L, 40-39	Nov. 23	Georgia State	L, 52-44
Oct. 3	at Troy	W, 38-17	Nov. 29	South Alabama	W, 45-38
Oct. 12	Arkansas State	W, 41-9	Jan. 3	North Texas (Bowl)	W, 30-28
Oct. 19	at Old Dominion	L, 24-14			

Record: 8-5 (5-3)

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Three **GEMS****DB JAYDEN BRADLEY**

Bradley is a two-way standout with a defensive mindset and a physical, aggressive play style. Whether at corner or safety, he brings intensity and toughness that should fit perfectly in Texas State's secondary. A potential P4-level talent, his competitive fire could make him a difference-maker in San Marcos.

DB CORDARIAN POWELL

Powell is a rangy, instinctual defensive back with a nose for the football. His ability to recover and track the ball gives him playmaking upside, and his positional flexibility adds value. Flying under the radar at Royse City, he could prove to be one of the steals of the Bobcats' class.

LB TJ BURKHALTER

Burkhalter's senior numbers — 136 tackles, six sacks, 22 tackles for loss — underscore his three-down impact. Equally comfortable as an edge blitzer, coverage linebacker or run-stuffer, he brings aggressive instincts and versatility. Texas State signed a defender capable of filling multiple roles from Day 1.

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TEXAS STATE BOBCATSJayden **BRADLEY**the **EXPERT'S TAKE**RECRUITING
GRADE**B-****DCTF RECRUITING ANALYST GREG POWERS**

Texas State is building a strong foundation under G.J. Kinne by blending experienced transfers with high-upside high school prospects. The 2025 class includes 18 athletic signees — all from Texas. While the portal addressed short-term needs, this prep haul reflects a deeper investment in long-term roster building. The Bobcats targeted players with traits to develop over time, offering upside at key positions. It's an under-the-radar group that should excite fans about what's taking shape in San Marcos.

2025 RECRUITING CLASS**HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE** (247Sports Rank: 100th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Arvis Battle Jr.	TE	6-4	220	Red Oak
Javarius Bell	DL	6-1	260	Brownsboro
Jaylen Boehm-Peterson	DB	6-3	190	Academy Of Holy Angels (Minn.)
Jayden Bradley	DB	6-0	185	Prosper Rock Hill
TJ Burkhalter	LB	6-1	220	Klein Forest
Tucker Cusano	WR	6-2	200	Coppell
Simeon Garner	DL	6-3	240	Tyler Legacy
Kirk Gildon	DL	6-5	235	Temple
Greg Gipson	DB	6-0	175	West Mesquite
Alan Grimme	DL	6-5	285	Vanceleave (Miss.)
Blake Isbell	DL	6-2	235	Coppell
D'Ante Keys	Edge	6-3	215	Bellville
Skylar Lewis	WR	6-0	185	Sulphur Springs
Gavin Parkhurst	QB	6-2	205	Fort Worth All Saints
Cordarian Powell	DB	6-1	165	Royse City
Cole Pryor	RB	5-9	180	San Antonio Reagan
Ameer Ross	OL	6-4	350	Duncanville
Craig Royal	CB	6-2	175	Strake Jesuit
Cameron Schultz	OL	6-4	280	Foley (Ala.)
Colt Sparks	QB	6-4	210	Gladewater Sabine
Julius Spencer	WR	6-0	185	Garland Lakeview Centennial
Preston Ward	OL	6-2	265	Dallas Parish Episcopal
Devarrick Woods	DL	6-3	290	Airline (La.)

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 89th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
David Abiara	DE	6-5	260	SMU
Mavin Anderson	WR	6-0	195	Cal
Kyran Bourda	DL	6-3	295	Arizona State
Greg Burrell	RB	6-1	205	UNLV
Neil Campbell	CB	5-11	205	Indiana Wesleyan
Ta'Derius Collins	EDGE	6-4	250	Indiana
Terrence Cooks Jr.	LB	6-2	225	TCU
Anfernee Crease	OT	6-6	316	Kentucky
Chase Davis	S	6-3	185	Utah State
J.P. Deeter	DL	6-3	280	Arizona State
Ashton Heflin	LB	6-1	223	Marshall
Chantz Johnson	LB	6-1	230	Texas AGM
L.J. Johnson	WR	5-10	180	Texas Tech
Ayden Jones	LB	6-2	215	Prairie View AGM
Holden Gerner	QB	6-3	205	Auburn
Charlie Leota	DL	6-3	350	West Texas AGM
Keldric Luster	QB	5-10	225	SMU
Tiaquelin Mims	WR	5-9	175	Southern Miss
Lysander Moeolo	OL	6-6	350	Syracuse
Javis Mynatt	S	6-0	190	Wofford
Cole Nilles	LB	6-4	250	Bryant
Michael Nwokocha	DL	6-5	310	Syracuse
Jaden Rios	CB	6-0	170	East Texas AGM
Donterry Russell	EDGE	6-4	225	Mississippi State
Jordan Sanders	DL	6-4	285	Cal Poly
Cole Snodgrass	TE	6-5	230	TCU
Kenard Snyder	Edge	6-0	265	Iowa State
Ty Stamey	TE	6-6	235	Louisiana
Tyryn Smith	WR	5-7	165	Cincinnati
Khamari Terrell	CB	6-1	190	Oregon
Malik Willis	CB	6-2	175	Campbell
Nate Yarnell	QB	6-6	215	Pittsburgh

UNDER THE RADAR**OL AMEER ROSS**

The three-star was a mauling force on one of the top talent-producing programs in the state at Duncanville, routinely overpowering would-be tacklers with ease. His combination of size, balance and 11-6A experience suggests that he can transition smoothly to the college game, fast-tracking his development and bolstering Texas State's upfront depth.

BY CARTER YATES**C-USA EMBRACES CHANGE AS COLLEGE FOOTBALL'S GATEWAY**

Conference USA is the FBS program starter home. It's a spot in major college football, but you're not staying forever.

Every realignment cycle pulls programs from C-USA. Thirty-three teams have played in the league since its founding in 1995. The 12 founding members — like Houston, Louisville, and Cincinnati — have long since graduated. UTEP will do so next year when it bolts for the Mountain West.

C-USA was on life support in 2022 when raids by the Sun Belt and American Athletic Conference left it with five programs. It turned to the FCS (Sam Houston, Kennesaw State, Delaware, Missouri State) and FBS independents Liberty and New Mexico State for survival.

The result is a league full of renters — content for now. That strategy, while bleak, is the only thing keeping the conference alive.

Liberty (8-4, 5-3) owns a 21-5 record since joining C-USA in 2022. Coach Jamey Chadwell's defense is stacked, with a First-Team All-C-USA pick at all three levels. Defensive end TJ Bush Jr. landed on the Lombardi Award watch list after 58 tackles and 5.5 sacks. Linebacker Joseph Carter led the team with 88 tackles, and safety Brylan Green anchors the secondary.

WKU (8-6, 6-2) was the only program ranked above Liberty in the portal, signing 30 transfers. OC Rick Bowie and QB Maverick McIvor averaged 469.6 yards per game together at Abilene Christian. It's not the first time WKU has tapped an FCS Texas OC/QB combo — coach Zach Kittley and Bailey Zappe (Houston Christian) set the single-season passing record with 5,987 yards.

Middle Tennessee (3-9, 2-6) is banking on a second-year bump for coach Derek Mason. As defensive play caller, he believes the second-worst scoring defense in C-USA will improve by returning four of its top six tacklers.

UTEP (3-9, 3-5) coach Scotty Walden is another second-year leader with high hopes. Winning two of their final three games in 2024 signaled his culture is taking root. UTEP landed C-USA's top-ranked recruiting class in back-to-back years. While five-star QB Malachi Nelson grabbed headlines, Walden points to the 42 Texas high school signees across two cycles as the real sign of growth.

Louisiana Tech (5-8, 4-4) gave former Texas Tech QB Sonny Cumbie a vote of confidence. After two 3-9 seasons, he led the Bulldogs to a bowl in Year Three. Second-team All-C-USA LB Kolbe Fields (71 tackles, 9 TFL) returns from a defense that led the league in yards allowed per game.

Jacksonville State (9-5, 7-1) coach

NEW MEXICO STATE WR TJ PRIDE (DeSOTO)

Pride led the Aggies as a freshman with 34 catches for 374 yards. He'll be a top target for new quarterback Logan Fife.

JACKSONVILLE STATE RB CAM COOK (ROUND ROCK STONY POINT)

The former four-star figures to slide into the Gamecocks' starting running back role after leading TCU with 460 rushing yards and nine touchdowns.

WKU QB MAVERICK McIVOR (SAN ANGELO CENTRAL)

McIvor (3,828 yards, 30 touchdowns) was named an All-American in 2024 after leading Abilene Christian to the FCS Playoffs.

MISSOURI STATE QB JACOB CLARK (ROCKWALL)

Clark (3,604 yards, 26 touchdowns) led the Missouri Valley Conference in nearly every passing category in his first full season as a starter.

LIBERTY OT JACK TUCKER (ARGYLE)

With Tucker as a starting tackle, Liberty ranked first in C-USA in total offense and second in scoring offense.

4

**Cam COOK**

He led TCU in rushing in 2024, and now he'll make his home at Jacksonville State, where he's expected to thrive under new coach Charles Kelly.

Charles Kelly has a tough act to follow in Rich Rodriguez, who transitioned the program from FCS to FBS. Early signs are promising — Kelly retained Rodriguez's entire high school class.

Sam Houston (10-3, 6-2) hired Phil Longo to replace KC Keeler, who engineered one of the nation's best Year 2 FBS turnarounds. Longo, the program's OC from 2014–16, returns with major renovations underway — including Bowers Stadium, which forces all 2025 home games to Shell Energy Stadium in Houston.

New Mexico State (3-9, 2-6) tumbled after a 10-win debut under coach Tony Sanchez. The Aggies hope Montana transfer QB Logan Fife and returning WR TJ Pride can revive the offense.

FIU (4-8, 3-5) and Kennesaw State (2-10, 2-6) both begin new rebuilds. FIU's Willie Simmons filled his staff with South Florida ties. Kennesaw's Jerry Mack leans on a defensive backfield led by all-conference picks JeRico Washington Jr. and Tyler Hallum.

Delaware and Missouri State aim to compete in their FBS debuts. Delaware coach Ryan Carty led the Blue Hens to

Three KEY GAMES**UTEP VS NEW MEXICO STATE, NOVEMBER 22**

The final Battle of I-10 as conference foes (it will be a non-conference game next year) should have massive bowl game implications for UTEP.

WKU VS SAM HOUSTON, AUGUST 23

The Phil Longo era begins with a Week Zero away game against a conference contender. Does it indicate how the season will go?

JACKSONVILLE STATE VS LIBERTY, SEPTEMBER 6

A matchup between two of C-USA's best teams the past two years in Week 2 shows who best handled an offseason of change.

back-to-back nine-win seasons for the first time since 2003–04. Missouri State QB Jacob Clark was a First-Team All-Conference selection.

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CONFERENCE USA



BY CARTER YATES

LONGO RETURNS TO HUNTSVILLE WITH HEART, HOPE AND HUSTLE

Phil Longo keeps two shirts from every school he coaches at in a traveling bag. He's a sentimental guy, and his four kids love wearing them. But he kept seven shirts from his time as Sam Houston's offensive coordinator from 2014–16, wearing them around even though the Texas sun had beaten them up.

"This was a hard place to leave," Longo said.

In a way, his heart never did.

After being let go as Wisconsin's offensive coordinator, Longo had an SEC OC offer, a Big Ten OC offer, and an NFL co-OC offer. The NFL deal was sealed, with a February 5 start date.

But then Sam Houston head coach K.C. Keeler took the Temple job.

The Longo family has two dozen friends here — including athletic director Bobby Williams — who've flown on vacations with them and stayed at their house. He got in trouble at Wisconsin's phone-free team dinner for watching the Sam Houston game.

So here Longo sits in the head coach's office, his heart, body, and mind back in one place. There's a massive stack of letters on his desk. He's called, texted, or written to all 1,411 of Sam Houston's football alums. Over his career, he's learned the world is about relationships. Hell, that's why he's here now. He wants everyone to feel involved in this program.

Longo has coached for 36 years and plans to go for 50 before retiring. And when he does, he'll do so in Texas.

"If I coached here for 15 years and retired, I'd have had a good life," Longo said.

But right now, he's enjoying coaching more than ever. Longo was hired a week into the transfer portal and signed 22 players with him and offensive coordinator Zack Patterson as the only two full-time employees. He brought players to the facility and had no one to introduce them to. That work ethic has transferred to the staff he's hired since. Defensive coordinator Freddie Aughtry-Lindsay is still moving furniture in and out of his office next door.

"This is one of the best staffs I've ever been a part of," Longo said. "I'm very, very proud of this staff we have here. From my general manager to my strength coach, who's an absolute rock star, to these guys in this room — all I've got to do is ask, and it gets done."

That's why he's confident he'll have Sam Houston rolling in two to three years. But Year 1 may be a tall task. He equates a new coaching hire to taking care of a house: you'll do the required

maintenance if you're only there a few years, but if you're in it for the long haul, you put in a pool and redo the kitchen. That means it'll look like a construction zone for a while. It's a fitting metaphor — Bowers Stadium is under renovation for 2025, and the Bearkats will play all home games at Shell Energy Stadium in Houston.

Bottom line: *Dave Campbell's Texas Football* does not expect Longo to repeat Keeler's 10–3 season, arguably the best coaching job in the country.

The Bearkats' defense, ranked atop Conference USA last season, lost its top 16 tacklers after defensive coordinator Skyler Cassity took the North Texas job. The team went through spring football with three scholarship defensive linemen, one of whom (Matthew Aribisala) transferred. While many pieces return on offense — like quarterback Hunter Watson — questions remain on whether they're compatible with Longo's Air Raid scheme.

Longo himself was a polarizing hire. His first stint here as offensive coordinator was electric. The Bearkats won two Southland Conference championships and produced Walter Payton Award-winning quarterback Jeremiah Briscoe. But Wisconsin ranked 101st nationally in scoring during Longo's 23 games as offensive coordinator, and he's only been a head coach for two years — at La Salle from 2004–05.

While Longo did coach with Keeler, he's not necessarily of the Keeler coaching tree. This will be a different reign than the one that brought Sam Houston from the FCS to the FBS. Time will tell how it works.

Sam Houston spent decades building its program with the hopes of receiving an FBS invite, which it got in November 2021. Two years after officially joining the blackjack table of major college football, it realizes NIL and a two-window transfer portal have bumped the ante up.

Sam Houston playing every home game in Houston while their stadium is renovated is a constant reminder - a lot of work needs to be done before last year's double-digit win season can become the new normal. In Phil Longo's first season with an entirely new defense, bowl game expectations are a stretch.



Phil LONGO

The former Bearkats offensive coordinator from 2014–2016 returns to Huntsville as head coach, hoping to continue the program's momentum.

DC
TX

Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
SAM HOUSTON BEARKATS

THE OFFENSE

Phil Longo's 'Air Raid' label is a bit misleading. Like many protégés of the late Mike Leach, Longo emphasizes the run more than classic Texas Tech or Washington State teams did.

Take his first stint at Sam Houston from 2014–16. The 2014 team ran for over 800 more yards than it passed. By 2016, quarterback Jeremiah Briscoe won the first of two Walter Payton Awards with an FCS-record 57 touchdown passes.

Whether the offense leans on the ground or the air depends on who wins the starting quarterback job. Returning starter Hunter Watson was the heart of Sam Houston's offense last year, rushing for 647 yards and nine touchdowns as a physical, between-the-tackles runner.

"Hunt is one tough son of a gun," linebacker C.J. Johnson said. "I guess it's that JUCO dawg in him."

But the body blows added up. Watson was battered by midseason, which led to inconsistent passing. He did flash his Air Raid potential with 213 yards on 82% completions in the bowl game.

Mabrey Mettauer, a former four-star from The Woodlands, followed Longo to Sam Houston and fits the Air Raid mold.

Whoever wins the job will inherit a streamlined playbook. Longo says he creates many looks for defenses but repeats core plays until they're second nature.

"From a learning standpoint, when they start getting bored or asking, 'What else you got?' I know it's becoming instinctive," Longo said.

Left tackle Kolt Dieterich, who made the All-CUSA freshman team splitting time with Luke Eckardt last season, will start full time in 2025. Eckardt shifts to guard. Rhett Larson, last year's left guard, could move to the right side. James Dawn is the favorite to replace longtime center Ethan Hagler. Maryland transfer Kevin Kalonji projects as the right tackle after enrolling this summer.

"You don't have to worry about anybody messing up on the offensive line," Dieterich said. "We've got a bunch of good dudes, and we work really well together."

That's good news for Sam Houston's running backs. How the Bearkats split carries remains undecided. Redshirt senior Elijah Green rushed for 558 yards at North Carolina with Longo in 2022 and averaged 6.9 yards per carry at Indiana last year. Longo also highlighted returnee Landan "Coco" Brown for his excellent spring.

The wide receiver room is more proven. Qua'Vez Humphreys leads returners with 385 yards and four touchdowns. The 6-3, 225-pounder averaged 19.3 yards per catch as the deep threat. But Michael Phoenix II might be the go-to option in 2025. At 6-2, 215 pounds, the redshirt senior offers a rare mix of size and speed that's tough to defend.

BY THE NUMBERS

23.8 – Sam Houston's points scored per game, which ranked 99th in the nation. The Bearkats won the lowest scoring game in the FBS (9-3 against Louisiana Tech).

168.2 – Sam Houston's passing yards per game, which ranked 122nd nationally. The Bearkats passed for under 100 yards in five games and never threw for more than 250.

32 – Sam Houston's time of possession (in minutes) which ranked 13th in the nation. The Bearkats weren't as explosive in the back half of the season, but they did sustain drives.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Former Sam Houston kicker Colby Sessums was a preseason All-Conference USA selection last season but missed the year with injury. In his absence, the Bearkats finished second-to-last in the conference by converting just 14-of-24 field goals. Sessums opted to transfer this offseason, which sets up a three-way battle between incumbent Christian Pavon, Purdue transfer RJ Lopez and incoming freshman Tate Ryan. Lopez is our pick to start, but he has been a kickoff specialist in four of his five collegiate seasons. His 6-for-11 career field goal mark is below what Sam Houston endured last season. Given defensive question marks, Sam Houston needs all the points it can get in 2025.

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

RB LANDAN 'COCO' BROWN

Brown immediately impressed Longo this spring with his talent and work ethic. The previous staff also praised Brown last spring, but he didn't record a carry in the fall. The running back room is more open in 2025, however, and Brown is making the most of his opportunity.

TE AUSTIN SMITH

Longo named Smith as the spring's most surprising player. The 6-5, 245-pound tight end won't put up 80 catches, but he'll play a large part in the offense as a physical mismatch in the middle of the field. Smith is competing with Mississippi State transfer Rayfield Lotten and Fernando Garza III.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#10 Hunter
QB Watson

R-SR., 6-3, 210
CELINA

#21 Elijah
RB Green

R-SR., 5-11, 210
ROSWELL, GA.

#7 Qua'Vez
WR Humphreys

R-SR., 6-3, 225
JUNCTION CITY, KAN.

#4 Michael
WR Phoenix II

R-SR., 6-2, 215
CONROE

#11 Malik
WR Phillips

R-SR., 5-11, 175
CLOVIS, N.M.

#19 Rayfield
TE Lotten

R-SO., 6-6, 240
NEW ORLEANS, LA.

#79 Kolt
LT Dieterich

R-SO., 6-6, 310
RIESEL

#56 Luke
LG Eckardt

SR., 6-6, 300
SPRING GROVE, ILL.

#71 James
C Dawn II

SR., 6-4, 315
NEW BRAUNFELS

#70 Rhett
RG Larson

R-JR., 6-5, 300
COLLEGE STATION

Kevin
RT Kalonji

R-SR., 6-5, 327
KINSHASA, CONGO

RJ
K Lopez

GR., 5-11, 180
HUNTINGTON BEACH, CALIF.

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THE DEFENSE

KC Keeler was the ultimate CEO at Sam Houston. When he hired coordinators, he allowed them to be head coaches of their side of the ball.

Phil Longo remembers Keeler walking into the offensive staff room once during his stint as the Bearkats' offensive coordinator from 2014–16. Keeler asked to show him a play, drew it on the whiteboard, then asked Longo for his thoughts.

"Coach, there are 12 guys in this formation," Longo said.

Keeler whipped his head around, tapped the marker as he counted each guy, threw it in the air, walked out of the room, and never returned.

Longo admired how Keeler delegated. But he was hired for his offensive mind. He'll call plays and give defensive coordinator Freddie Aughtry-Lindsay the same autonomy he once enjoyed.

"I've never seen a guy who promotes his players more," Longo said. "Guys want to play for him. I think that's the biggest compliment you can give a coach."

Aughtry-Lindsay, a defensive coordinator for the fourth time, believes spending the last five years as nickels coach at NC State will make him a better DC.

"From the first meeting, I told them we're going to coach them hard and demand a lot," Aughtry-Lindsay said. "But we're going to love them too."

This is Aughtry-Lindsay's show. He inherits a roster that lost its top 16 tacklers.

Redshirt senior CJ Johnson is the leading returner with 16 stops. His vocal leadership is more important than his stats on a unit full of new faces. He and Aughtry-Lindsay have been in lockstep this offseason.

"I really appreciate him, because whether it's football or off-the-field stuff, that's a guy you can lean on," Johnson said. "We love that man."

Linebacker Artayvious Fish projects to line up next to Johnson in the base 4-2-5. Fish started 12 games for Akron last season and recorded 68 tackles.

Aughtry-Lindsay mentored three NFL defensive backs during his recent NC State stop. The secondary will be Sam Houston's biggest strength in 2025.

Redshirt senior Emon Allen has been with Sam Houston since 2021. His patience should pay off with more snaps at nickel and cornerback. Cornell transfer Trey Harris brings rangy athleticism (6-4, 205) to the safety room. Cornerback Alonzo Edwards Jr. had a strong offseason after transferring from Texas State.

On paper, the defensive line depth is a concern. Quardale Patt played six games last year but didn't register a tackle. Darien Jackson had 30 tackles and five sacks as a freshman at Mount San Antonio College. On the edge, former Alabama player Keelan Cox returns to the FBS after tallying nine tackles for loss and six sacks last season at Texas Southern.

BY THE

NUMBERS

20.46 – Sam Houston's points allowed per game, which tied for 21st nationally and ranked atop Conference USA. The Bearkats won two games scoring 10 points or less.

177 – Sam Houston's passing yards allowed per game, which ranked 13th nationally. The Bearkats lost two First Team All-Conference performers in the backend (Caleb Weaver, Kavian Gaither.)

16 – Sam Houston's interceptions, which ranked 14th nationally. Defensive backs Caleb Weaver and Jaylon Jimmerson tied for first in Conference USA with four interceptions each.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Besides the secondary, every position on Sam Houston's defense has major depth concerns. Most of this is out of the staff's control. The Bearkats ranked 135th out of 136 teams in returning production on defense. Longo was hired a week into the winter portal window, after many of the major dominoes had fallen. The staff landed several potential starters in the spring window, but they are still in a precarious spot for 2025 if any injuries arise. How do the Bearkats prioritize recovery and practice smarter to keep the few bodies they have healthy and fresh throughout the long season?

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

LB JAMAIR DIAZ

Diaz, a transfer from Glenville State, led Division II with 21 tackles for loss in 2024 and earned second team All-American honors. The 6-1, 235-pound junior could line up at linebacker or rush off the edge. Sam Houston finished second in Conference USA in sacks, but lost every player who registered one.

CB DAVION GREEN

Green was a JUCO All-American at Palomar College who led the state of California with nine interceptions last season. At 6-foot, 165 pounds last season, his size kept him in the junior college ranks despite outsized production. He's put on 30 pounds of muscle this offseason. Green enrolled in the summer.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#99 Keelan
DE Cox

R-SR., 6-4, 240
HOUSTON

Darien
NT Jackson

SO., 6-2, 285
LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

#98 Quardale
DT Patt

SR., 6-5, 295
STAFFORD

#33 Zeiqui
DE Lawton

R-SR., 6-1, 270
CHARLESTON, W.VA.

#8 CJ
LB Johnson

R-SR., 6-1, 225
LITTLE ELM

#6 Antayvious
LB Fish

GR., 6-0, 230
ATLANTA, GA.

#16 Joe
CB Swen

R-SO., 6-3, 190
PHILADELPHIA, PA.

#0 Alonzo
CB Edwards

GR., 5-11, 190
MADISON, MISS.

CJ
S Brown

SR., 5-11, 195
CANTON, MICH.

#3 Trey
S Harris

GR., 6-4, 205
ATLANTA, GA.

#7 Emon
NB Allen

R-SR., 5-9, 180
AUSTIN

SCHEDULE & PREDICTIONS

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS
FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

"The things we see and observe are all real positives. I think their staff gets after it recruiting, and things seem to be trending up with facilities and money. I think Longo is a really good coach and is really sharp. He will find unique ways for them to have an advantage."

"They hit the JUCO jackpot (last season). Not flashy, but tough, physical and well-coached. Their wins against Texas State and Louisiana Tech are who they are."

"I'm excited for Longo to be back here in Texas. I know he has a great track record for high-performing offenses. When he was OC, Sam Houston could score with anyone."



Hunter WATSON

Photo Credit: Tyler Kaufman/Getty Images

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
AUG. 23	at WKU	L	OCT. 28	at La Tech	W
Aug. 29	UNLV	L	Nov. 8	at Oregon State	L
SEPT. 6	at Hawaii	L	NOV. 15	DELAWARE	L
Sept. 20	at Texas	L	Nov. 22	at Middle Tennessee	L
OCT. 2	at New Mexico State	W	NOV. 29	FIU	W
Oct. 9	JAX STATE	L			
OCT. 15	UTEP	L			

Record: 3-9

BIGGEST GAME — OCT. 15 VS UTEP

Programs are judged by their accomplishments and what their closest neighbors accomplish. UTEP and Sam Houston need successful years to build momentum for the future (UTEP for the Mountain West move, Sam Houston for a renovated Bowers Stadium). The Bearkats, in Year 1 of Phil Longo, beating UTEP in Year 2 of Scotty Walden would point to Sam Houston already gaining on their fellow Texas team in the rebuild process.

TRAP GAME — NOV. 15 DELAWARE

This one's personal for Delaware head coach Ryan Carty, who was the offensive coordinator at Sam Houston from 2018-21. That extra motivation, combined with Delaware being in its first season as an FBS program, puts the Bearkats on upset watch. Plus, if the season has gone astray by this point, have the Bearkats lost confidence?

UPSET GAME — AUG. 23 AT WKU

Things get weird in Week 1 but go haywire in Week Zero. Western Kentucky must prepare for this game by watching film of Phil Longo and Freddie Aughtry-Lindsay's schemes at different schools. They won't know how those schemes fit with the Sam Houston players until the game kicks off.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING: 7-5

Sam Houston is Conference USA's surprise team again, but with the opposite formula of last year. Longo's scheme leads to a top-three conference finish in points per game, and the defense usually makes the one or two stops it needs to win the game. The Bearkats open a newly renovated Bowers Stadium in 2026 with preseason buzz.

FLOOR: 1-11

A brutal opening stretch that includes a conference opener with WKU, a trip to Hawaii and a game against Texas prevents Sam Houston from winning its first game until October. A thin defensive rotation cannot stop a nosebleed, which forces the offense to press and make mistakes. Sam Houston finishes the year searching for moral victories because the scoreboard doesn't show any.

2024 RESULTS

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 31	at Rice	W, 34-14	Oct. 29	La Tech	W, 9-3
Sept. 7	at UCF	L, 45-14	Nov. 16	at Kennesaw State	W, 23-17 (OT)
Sept. 14	Hawaii	W, 31-13	Nov. 23	at Jax State	L, 21-11
Sept. 21	New Mexico State	W, 31-11	Nov. 29	Liberty	W, 20-18
Sept. 28	Texas State	W, 40-39	Dec. 19	Georgia Southern	W, 31-26
Oct. 3	at UTEP	W, 41-21		(New Orleans Bowl)	
Oct. 16	WKU	L, 31-14			
Oct. 22	at FIU	W, 10-7			

Record: 10-3 (6-2)

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Three **GEMS**

QB LANDYN LOCKE

Locke, the younger brother of Arizona's Braedyn Locke, has Big 10-level arm strength and was once committed to Wisconsin. A coaching change brought him to Huntsville, and SHSU fans should be pumped. He throws a tight spiral with zip and can stretch the field — future QB1 written all over him.

WR LONDON DEYON

At 6-foot-4, Deyon brings size, physicality, and a red zone presence. He boxes out defenders on contested catches and isn't afraid to block. A quarterback's best friend on third down and inside the 20, Deyon could carve out a role as a mismatch nightmare and jump ball weapon.

EDGE ANTHONY SHORTER

Shorter is a dynamic, athletic edge rusher with a high ceiling. He starred on both sides of the ball for Columbus' first-ever state football title run, earning all-state and first-team all-district honors (on offense and defense). With 55 tackles, 19 TFLs, and 10 sacks, his game-breaking upside is backed by solid production. A quarterback's best friend on third down and inside the 20, Deyon could carve out a role as a mismatch nightmare and jump ball weapon.

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Landyn **LOCKE**

Photo Credit: Jim Klenke

RECRUITING BREAKDOWN

the **EXPERT'S TAKE**

RECRUITING
GRADE

D+

DCTF RECRUITING ANALYST GREG POWERS

Sam Houston's recruiting cycle was marked by transition, with a head coaching change coming just after the early signing period. Despite the disruption, new head coach Phil Longo arrived with a clear vision and wasted no time retooling the roster — especially at quarterback. Known for his eye in developing signal-callers, Longo quickly landed two talented QBs through both the portal and high school ranks, each with Power Four interest. The Kats maintained a patient approach to high school recruiting, looking for late risers overlooked by bigger programs. It's a fresh start for a program looking to build long-term depth and identity.

2025 RECRUITING CLASS

HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE (247Sports Rank: 124th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Zo'maryon Bryan.....	OL	6-4	315	Kilgore College
Logan Cahill.....	OL	6-4	285	Prosper
Caius Coy.....	Edge	6-2	230	Round Rock Westwood
London Deyon.....	WR	6-4	190	Galveston Ball
Brody Henderson.....	Edge	6-3	220	Jenks (Okla.)
Jayveon Johnson.....	LB	6-1	205	Clear Brook
Landyn Locke.....	QB	6-3	180	Rockwall
Payton McDonald.....	OL	6-4	305	Iowa Western C.C.
Anthony Shorter.....	Edge	6-3	220	Columbus
Graceson Spann.....	OL	6-5	270	Blue Ridge

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 114th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Cade Adams.....	DL	6-0	285	Georgia Tech
Jace Arnold.....	CB	5-9	185	Wisconsin
Kaleb Black.....	WR	5-10	175	Arizona State
CJ Brown.....	S	5-11	195	Bowling Green
Keelan Cox.....	Edge	6-4	240	Texas Southern
JaMair Diaz.....	LB	6-1	235	Glenville State
Chris Eaton Jr.....	DE	6-4	200	Hampton
Alonzo Edwards Jr.....	S	5-11	190	Texas State
Antavious Fish.....	LB	6-0	235	Akron
Elijah Green.....	RB	6-0	205	Indiana
Trey Harris.....	S	6-4	200	Cornell
Kevin Kalonji.....	OT	6-5	327	Maryland
Zeiqui Lawton.....	DL	6-1	270	West Virginia
Rayfield Lotten.....	TE	6-6	240	Mississippi State
Mabrey Mettauer.....	QB	6-4	230	Wisconsin
Alton McCaskill.....	RB	6-1	205	Arizona State
Grady O'Neill.....	WR	5-11	165	Wisconsin
Nico Ottomanelli.....	K	6-2	170	Nebraska
Jerrian Parker.....	RB	5-10	205	Southern Illinois
Shane Porter.....	RB	5-10	186	North Texas
Cecil Powell.....	S	6-0	215	Troy
AJ Sargent.....	DL	6-0	280	Tarleton State
Isaac Sohn.....	OL	6-5	297	North Texas
Aviyon Smith-Mack.....	WR	5-9	170	LIU Brooklyn
Jalyn Stanford.....	S	5-10	185	Houston
Cam Todd.....	OL	6-2	300	Coastal Carolina
Quinton Williams.....	OT	6-3	308	Louisiana

UNDER THE RADAR

LOGAN CAHILL

A battle-tested interior lineman, Cahill faced top-tier competition in 6A and is ready for the college grind. His high football IQ and experience playing alongside five future Division I recruits give him a solid foundation. The three-star's mental readiness and physicality should help him adapt quickly in Huntsville.

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TO LEARN MORE



BY CARTER YATES

WALDEN BRINGS SWEAT EQUITY TO MINERS' FOOTBALL REBUILD

UTEP head coach Scotty Walden had a different "Art of the Deal" strategy during informal contract talks with athletic director Jim Senter this offseason: he wanted to take less money.

Walden's just over a year into the job, but he was hired in a different era of college football. Revenue sharing with athletes begins July 1. UTEP moves to the Mountain West Conference in 2026. The ground is shifting quickly — and Walden is leaning into the turbulence.

While contract changes didn't materialize, Walden and his wife, Callie, launched the "Walden Family Challenge," matching up to \$70,000 in NIL funding through April. He understands they're asking more from boosters — and he wants them to know he's not sitting back collecting checks. He's investing his own money, showing up shirtless with painted letters at basketball games, and crowd-surfing with his players after wins. This is his program in every sense.

"We are fully committed to building this program, making this the biggest turnaround in college football," Walden said. "The 915, the city of El Paso, deserves a winner."

Amid an 0-6 start to his tenure, Walden looked for wins on an internal scorecard. He believed Year 1 could still be a success if the Miners didn't compromise culturally and finished strong. He likens his role as culture setter to a basketball referee — calling every violation early, then letting players police themselves as they learn expectations.

Double-overtime and rivalry wins over Kennesaw State and New Mexico State helped establish the tone. This offseason, Walden carried a pickaxe marked with "15," symbolizing how close UTEP was — a 3-9 team that was 14 points away from bowl eligibility and held fourth-quarter leads in three losses. The axe is a visual cue: you're close, but you still have to swing.

Offseason boot camp included mat drills in the back room of historic Memorial Gym, where the 1966 Texas Western basketball team practiced. Walden wanted players to understand the legacy of that team—the first to start an all-Black lineup in the national title game—and the grit it took to make history.

"This time a year ago, the average squat max in our program was 365 pounds," Walden said. "There are high school programs doing that." Now, the team average is 470 pounds—an increase of more than 28%.

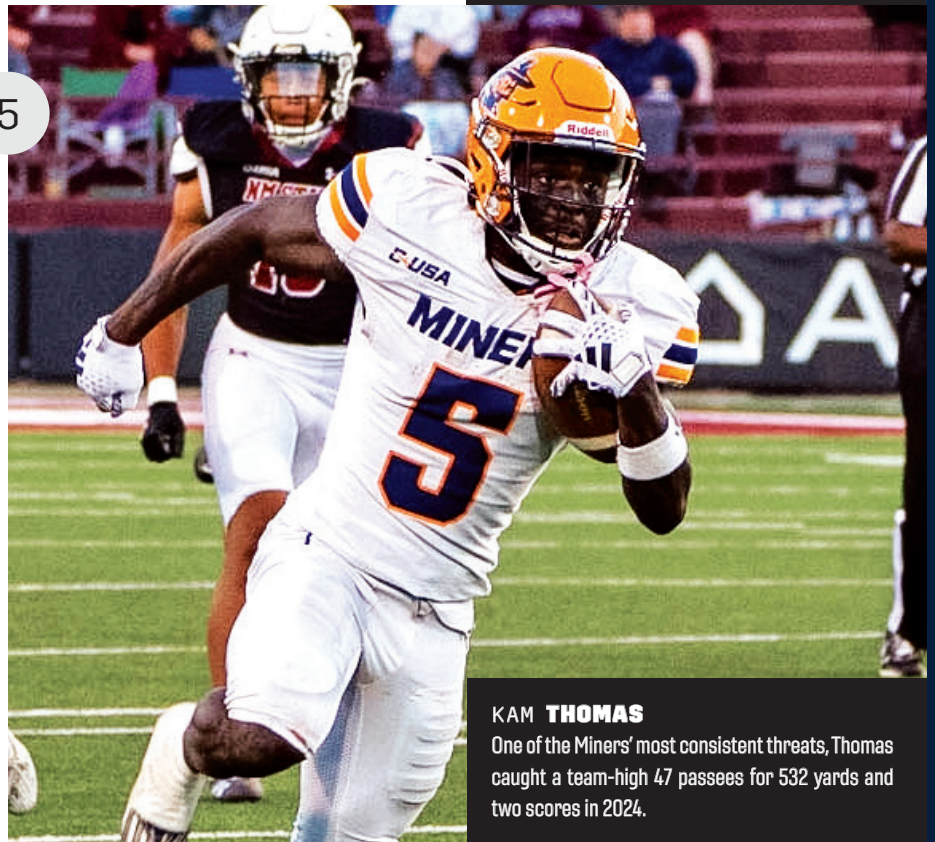
New coordinators Mark Cala (offense) and Bobby Daly (defense) bring the same edge. Daly, who worked his way from graduate assistant to DFO to defensive coordinator at Montana State, inherits a UTEP defense that led Conference USA in sacks and tackles for loss. Cala arrives with experience in Walden's tempo-heavy system from previous stops under Kendal Briles at FAU, Arkansas, and TCU.

The offense returns two proven playmakers in All-Conference USA wide receiver Kenny Odom (741 yards, 8 TDs) and "Miner Back" Kam Thomas, an all-conference punt returner who lines up at both receiver and running back.

They'll be weapons for whoever wins the quarterback battle between returning starter Skyler Locklear and former five-star Malachi Nelson — the highest-rated recruit in UTEP history and a major offseason headline-maker.

Walden has dabbled in the portal, but he's betting big on Texas high school football. His first two recruiting classes ranked atop Conference USA, and his 42 Texas signees are the most in the FBS. It's not just a strategy — it's a philosophy.

"We're going to build this with players from winning programs in Texas," Walden said. "UTEP's always been about JUCOs and transfers. If we want consistency, we need elite high school football players."



KAM THOMAS

One of the Miners' most consistent threats, Thomas caught a team-high 47 passes for 532 yards and two scores in 2024.

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Photo Credit: UTEP Athletics

Where Legends Begin

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THE OFFENSE

The ‘Miner Drill’ is the character test of UTEP’s football program. It’s deceptively simple: one team-wide 40-yard sprint at the end of every offseason conditioning workout. But it’s pass-fail—everyone has to be perfect, or they do it again. Scotty Walden demands that his team be at their best late in the game when others are tired.

That mentality helped spark UTEP’s offense in its final two Conference USA games—a 43-35 double-overtime win over Kennesaw State and a 42-35 win over New Mexico State. In those contests, quarterback Skyler Locklear and wide receiver Kenny Odom connected for four touchdowns and made their case as UTEP’s offensive future.

Walden calls Odom the “definition of a Miner.” At 5-10, 170 pounds, the redshirt junior is a savvy route-runner whose eight touchdown catches often came in clutch moments — two in overtime against Kennesaw State.

Locklear, meanwhile, had more to prove this offseason after UTEP signed former five-star quarterback Malachi Nelson. Despite throwing just 20 passes at USC and Boise State, Nelson’s name made him the assumed starter to many outside the program. But Walden, who first coached Locklear at Austin Peay, said last year’s starter had his best spring yet. The battle will stretch into fall camp.

Left tackle Mark Robinson — a spring standout and 2024 Sun Conference Freshman of the Year at Southeastern University — was one of the most important portal additions. Redshirt seniors Ivan Escobar and Azizi Henry missed spring but will be impact players. Escobar is expected to move to center following Brennan Smith’s transfer to Mississippi State. Returnees Joseph Immediato and Jaquan Toney are battling at right guard. Walden said this spring that Toney will take on a larger role after serving as a top reserve last year.

Miner Back Kam Thomas is the second proven weapon behind Odom. A hybrid wide receiver/running back and elite returner, Thomas will be used creatively by new offensive coordinator Mark Cala, formerly at TCU. Cala compares Thomas’ versatility to TCU’s Savion Williams—though Thomas is 5-7 to Williams’ 6-5, their roles could be similarly dynamic, including potential wildcat QB snaps.

UTEP needs another receiving threat to emerge behind Odom and Thomas. The Miners may run more tight end sets — Judah Ezinwa caught a touchdown in the spring game and could factor in.

Running back Ashten Emory, a former district MVP from Rockwall and part of Walden’s first recruiting class, had “a hell of a spring.” The staff is also high on Charlotte transfer Hahsaun Wilson as a steady presence in the backfield.

BY THE NUMBERS

19.6 – Points UTEP scored per game, which ranked 122nd in the nation. The Miners scored under 20 points per contest for the second year in a row.

7.33 – Tackles for loss per game UTEP allowed, which ranked 123rd in the FBS and last in Conference USA. The average offensive linemen added this offseason was 6-6, 315 pounds.

10.76 – UTEP’s passing yards per completion ranked 115th in the nation. Part of this was by design; part was a lack of protection.

KEEP AN EYE ON

UTEP’s ‘Blue Blaze’ offense prides itself on snapping the football in 12 seconds or less. At its best, the pace prevents defenses from subbing and causes confusion. But more often than not in 2024, the Miners didn’t control the ball and hung their defense out to dry. UTEP’s average 27 minutes of possession time was 113th in the nation. No running back averaged better than 4 yards per carry, which forced UTEP to rely on the quick pass (and risk stopping the clock) as an extension of the run game. Can new starter Ashten Emory help the Miners sustain drives?

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

TE CASH CHEEKS

The Northern Colorado transfer is a matchup nightmare for his playmaking ability at 6-7, 250 pounds. He runs like a receiver and hits like a tight end. The staff loved the spring he had and thinks he’s poised for a big year. Cheeks is competing with returner Judah Ezinwa.

WR ARAMONI RHONE

The 6-5, 195-pound receiver gives the Miners size on the outside, which they lacked last season. Even though he’s made some mistakes (which is to be expected after transferring in from UAPB), the coaches describe him as an eager learner whose effort and desire are constant. He’ll push for early playing time.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#6 Kenny
WRX Odom

5-10, 170, R-JR.
SAVANNAH, GA.

#0 Ashton
WRZ Nickelberry

5-10, 181, R-SR.
BRANDON, MISS.

#82 Judah
TE Ezinwa

6-3, 245, R-JR.
FONTANA, CALIF.

#5 Kam
MB Thomas

5-7, 184, R-SR.
BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

#66 Mark
LT Robinson

6-5, 320, SO.
ALTAMONTE SPRINGS, FLA.

#69 James
LG Williams

6-3, 325, SO.
MOORE, OKLA.

#53 Ivan
C Escobar

6-2, 305, R-SR.
EL PASO

#60 Joseph
RG Immediato

6-4, 318, R-SR.
EL PASO

#74 Azizi
RT Henry

6-4, 310, R-SR.
WYLIE

#9 Skyler
QB Locklear

5-11, 195, R-JR.
CLAYTON, N.C.

#4 Ashten
RB Emory

5-11, 195, R-FR.
DALLAS

#33 Tanner
K Cragun

6-2, 195, R-SO.
FRISCO

THE DEFENSE

Scotty Walden doesn't believe in overhauling defensive schemes for a new coordinator. Bobby Daly replaces JJ Clark — who took a job with the Dallas Cowboys — but Walden's "Orange Swarm" three-down base defense remains intact.

Daly prefers placing the burden of learning on himself rather than his players. He arrived at UTEP for his first FBS coordinator role to step out of his comfort zone. A former All-American linebacker at Montana State, Daly spent the last six years coaching at his alma mater.

Still, he's adding his own twist. Daly will call more blitzes from second-level defenders and lean into formations featuring three traditional linebackers and a Bandit edge rusher — whereas UTEP previously played more two-linebacker sets.

He inherits a loaded linebacker room. Stratton Shufelt made the All-Conference USA Freshman Team last season. But the former No. 1 recruit in New Mexico still has work to catch his father, Pete, on UTEP's all-time tackles list.

Walden also reunited with two former Austin Peay linebackers. Joshua Rudolph — second in tackles on the 2022 Gobs — spent the past two seasons at Indiana. Garrett Hawkins, once tabbed for a breakout before Walden brought him to UTEP, is expected to make an impact.

Former Austin Peay standout Xavier Smith headlines a long, athletic safety unit. He led UTEP with five passes defended and ranked third with 78 tackles. Smith pairs with 6-foot-3 Lantz Russell, a spring standout mentioned often by receiver Kam Thomas.

UTEP ranked 99th nationally in plays of 10+ yards allowed. Injuries played a role — at times last year, the Miners had just two healthy cornerbacks and were forced to shuffle linebackers into the secondary. Depth is no longer a crisis. It starts with Neil Campbell, a three-time NAIA All-American with 16 career interceptions at Indiana Wesleyan.

While secondary depth is improved, the defensive line is a concern. KD Johnson returns at defensive tackle, thanks to a court ruling tied to Vanderbilt quarterback Diego Pavia's eligibility case. Johnson, a nursing major, is a stabilizing presence. Ashton Coker, a sophomore, is the only other defensive tackle on the post-spring roster.

UTEP's pass rush is built around Derek Burns and Udoka Ezeani. Burns, a 6-5, 254-pound New Mexico State transfer, earned rave reviews in winter workouts and spring practice. Ezeani (6-1, 216) is tasked with replacing two-time All-CUSA Bandit Maurice Westmoreland (now at Tulane). He's smaller but disruptive as a blitzing threat.

BY THE

NUMBERS

32.33 – Points UTEP allowed per game, which ranked 112th in the nation. This figure is skewed by allowing 40 points against Nebraska and 56 points against Tennessee.

3 – Sacks UTEP had per game, which ranked first in Conference USA and tied for 11th in the FBS. The Miners must replace leading sack getters Maurice Westmoreland (8) and Kyran Duhon (7).

179.3 – Rushing yards UTEP allowed per game, which ranked 102nd nationally. Defensive tackle KD Johnson and a new crop of linebackers must bow up to put offenses behind the chains.

KEEP AN EYE ON

Bobby Daly earned this job by coordinating Montana State to the FCS National Championship Game in 2024, surrendering just 18.3 points per game. But he is coaching UTEP's prior scheme (3-3-5) instead of teaching the players what he ran at Montana State. While it's difficult to calculate the exact number of coaches who keep the same scheme despite a different coordinator, UTEP head coach Scotty Walden's approach is in the minority. With the transfer portal, Group of Five teams must grab more new players every offseason anyway. But if the Miners' defense excels this season, will more G6 coaches adopt this strategy?

BREAKOUT CANDIDATES

LB MICAH DAVEY

An All-American linebacker at McNeese State, Davey totaled 311 tackles, 20 tackles for loss, seven pass breakups and 5.5 sacks over a four-year career. The proven playmaker enters a crowded linebacker room for the Miners but may be too talented and experienced to keep off the field.

DE ELIJAH BALDWIN

Baldwin was 6-7, 200 pounds when Walden recruited him from San Antonio John Jay. The defensive end has bulked up to 245 pounds after a redshirt year but maintained the same gliding athleticism. Baldwin is behind some upperclassmen on the depth chart, but there's heavy rotation at the pass rusher spot.

PROJECTED STARTERS

#11 Derek DE Burns 6-5, 254, R-JR. DALLAS	#90 Ashton NT Coker 6-2, 290, SO. KATY	#7 KD DT Johnson 6-1, 275, GR. HOUSTON	#6 Udoka BDT Ezeani 6-1, 216, R-SR. RICHMOND	
#1 Joshua LB Rudolph 5-11, 230, SR. MONTGOMERY, ALA.	#8 Stratton LB Shufelt 6-2, 230, SO. RIO RANCHO, N.M.	#43 Garrett LB Hawkins 6-3, 227, JR. SEVIERVILLE, TENN.	#4 Neil CB Campbell 5-11, 205, GR. CHICAGO, ILL.	
#18 Justin CB Content 6-1, 185, SO. HOSCHTON, GA.	#2 Xavier S Smith 6-0, 195, R-JR. ATLANTA, GA.	#22 Lantz S Russell 6-3, 210, R-SR. RIVERSIDE, CALIF.	#5 Solo SPR Barnes 6-3, 205, SR. NEW ORLEANS, LA.	#42 Noah P Botsford 6-3, 200, JR. FORT LAUDERDALE, FLA.

SCHEDULE & PREDICTIONS

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

ANONYMOUS SCOUTING REPORTS FROM THE OTHER SIDELINE

"It will be interesting to see if their 'fake it til you make it' strategy is going to work. Jumping up and down on the sidelines in the 4th quarter down 4 scores to 'bring the juice' goes over fine in Year 1. Hard to sustain the buy-in without results. So we will see if they can live up to the self-manufactured hype."

"They play extremely hard. When they are able to get a few recruiting cycles through there, they will have a chance to compete in Conference USA (and then the Mountain West)."

"UTEP is a coaching staff that is doing things the right way. Love seeing the energy they are bringing to that place and how their staff is going about the recruiting process. UTEP looks to be a program headed in the right direction."



Stratton SHUFELT

Photo Credit: UTEP Athletics

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
AUG. 30	at Utah State	W	OCT. 28	at Kennesaw State	W
SEPT. 6	UT MARTIN	W	NOV. 8	JAX STATE	L
SEPT. 13	at Texas	L	NOV. 15	at Missouri State	L
SEPT. 20	ULM	L	NOV. 22	NM STATE	L
SEPT. 27	LA TECH	W	NOV. 29	at Delaware	W
OCT. 8	LIBERTY	L			
OCT. 15	at Sam Houston	W			

RECORD: 6-6

BIGGEST GAME — NOV. 22 VS. NEW MEXICO STATE

UTEP and New Mexico State will continue the Battle of I-10 after the Miners move to the Mountain West. But fans never forget the last game as conference foes... for now. Plus, a Week 10 spot puts massive bowl game implications on the Miners. For multiple reasons, this game determines if Scott Walden's program is moving in the right direction.

TRAP GAME — NOV. 15 AT MISSOURI STATE

The Bears may be a first-year FBS program, but UTEP cannot afford to sleepwalk against anyone. The Miners lost in overtime to an FCS team last year. But this game has letdown potential, wedged between bouts with reigning conference champion Jacksonville State and rival New Mexico State.

UPSET GAME — OCT. 8 VS. LIBERTY

The Flames have scorched through Conference USA in their first two seasons with a combined 21-5 record. Coach Jamey Chadwell's team should be strong again in 2025 with linebacker Joseph Carter and safety Brylan Green. But this will be Chadwell's first season without running back Quinton Cooley, who rushed for over 2,600 the past two years.

CEILING/FLOOR

CEILING: 9-3

Malachi Nelson wins the quarterback battle and shows Conference USA why he was rated a five-star. The addition of Nelson and added interior size unlocks Scotty Walden's playbook, and the 'Blue Blaze' offense produces fireworks. Bobby Daly's defense operates in attack mode with frequent blitzes because it knows it doesn't have to be perfect — the offense will score.

FLOOR: 3-9

The Miners are still overmatched in the trenches, preventing either quarterback from finding a rhythm as Walden flip-flops between them. The unit's reliance on tempo and the inability to run the football results in fast three-and-outs, putting the defense in a bind. One or two defensive line injuries open the floodgates of Daly's scheme.

2024 RESULTS (3-9, 3-5)

DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT
Aug. 31	at Nebraska	L 40-7	Oct. 16	FIU	W 30-21
Sept. 7	Southern Utah	L 27-24 (OT)	Oct. 22	at La Tech	L 14-10
Sept. 14	at Liberty	L 28-10	Nov. 2	Middle Tennessee	L 20-13
Sept. 21	at Colorado State	L 27-17	Nov. 9	Kennesaw State	W 43-35 (2OT)
Oct. 3	Sam Houston	L 41-21	Nov. 23	at Tennessee	L 56-0
Oct. 10	at Western Ky.	L 44-17	Nov. 30	at NM State	W 42-35

DC TX

TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
UTEP MINERS

Three **GEMS****WR RYLAND BRADFORD**

Bradford is a long-striding, big-bodied playmaker with legit 10.5 speed and a knack for big moments. He was a matchup nightmare at Abilene and brings that same dynamic upside to UTEP's offense. Expect him to stretch defenses vertically and flip momentum quickly once he settles into the offense.

WR TJ TILLMAN

Tillman is an explosive three-phase athlete who impacted every facet of the game at Tascosa. A former Texas Tech commit, he's a perfect slot fit who also brings elite return skills. His versatility and playmaking ability give UTEP a true sparkplug on offense and special teams, packaged with a marquee recruiting victory in West Texas.

RB ELIJAH MCCOY

McCoey excelled in a West Texas option scheme, totaling over 4,000 yards while showing sudden acceleration and vision. His top-end speed turns minimal daylight into long gains. UTEP adds a reliable workhorse back with game-breaking ability who can transition quickly to college ball once he settles into the new scheme.



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TJ **TILLMAN**

Photo Credit: Carter Pryde

RECRUITING BREAKDOWN

the **EXPERT'S TAKE**RECRUITING
GRADE**B-****DCTF RECRUITING ANALYST GREG POWERS**

Scotty Walden has quickly turned UTEP into one of Conference USA's most aggressive recruiting programs, landing a top-three class in back-to-back years. The Miners have completely reshaped their roster with over 100 new additions across the last two cycles, leaning heavily on the transfer portal to stay competitive. But what sets UTEP apart is Walden's focus on recruiting Texas high school talent—a shift that's resonated with coaches and players across the state.

2025 RECRUITING CLASS**HIGH SCHOOL/JUNIOR COLLEGE** (247Sports Rank: 82nd)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Jordan Andrus	TE	6-2	230	Houston Yates
Josh Bell	LB	5-7	180	Eulless Trinity
Kane Bowen	LB	6-1	200	Sherman
Shakaun Bowser	WR	6-5	255	Garden City C.C. (Kan.)
Ryland Bradford	WR	6-0	190	Abilene
Vashon Brunswick II	LB	6-0	235	Sachse
Diego De La Cruz	OL	6-4	315	St Joseph Academy
Darien Fantroy	DB	6-1	175	Fort Worth North Side
Jamal Friot	Edge	6-3	230	Spring Dekaney
Allen Gant	DB	5-11	200	Lubbock Coronado
Toric Goins Jr.	WR	6-1	185	Trinity Valley C.C.
Nik Henry	WR	5-8	155	Seguin
Lorenzo Hill	WR	5-11	165	Denton Ryan
Maddox Huber	OL	6-6	315	Hamshire-Fannett
Josiah Jones	DB	6-1	185	Crosby
Dennis Lafferty III	OL	6-7	320	Northeastern Okla. AGM (Okla.)
Justin Lee	Edge	6-1	230	Round Rock
Jimmy Leon	Edge	6-4	240	Mica Mountain (Ariz.)
Elijah McCoy	RB	5-8	180	Midland
Leander Parrish	Edge	6-2	225	Rockwall
Preston Perkins	OL	6-5	270	Austin High
Tyler Roberts	OL	6-8	315	Argyle
CJ Simon	WR	5-11	155	Moore (Okla.)
Ryder Slaton	OL	6-7	295	Melissa
Axon Smith	DL	6-4	230	Prague
Grant Stewart	DB	5-11	180	Manvel
TJ Tillman	WR	5-10	160	Amarillo Tascosa
Chad Warner	QB	6-2	180	Cibola Steele
Erion Wilkins	DB	6-0	170	Atascocita
Darnell Williams	ATH	5-10	180	Texarkana Texas High
James Williams	OL	6-3	325	Northeastern Okla. AGM (Okla.)
Royce Wilson	Edge	6-3	220	Fort Bend Willowridge
Copelin Windfont	LB	5-10	220	Crosby

TRANSFERS (247Sports Rank: 96th)

PLAYER	POS.	HT.	WT.	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
Solo Barnes	S	6-3	205	Fayetteville State
Marcell Blocker	CB	6-3	190	Florida Memorial
Ta'ir Brooks	WR	6-3	200	Northern Arizona
Jaylan Brown	WR	6-1	185	Michigan State
Derek Burns	Edge	6-5	255	New Mexico State
Neil Campbell	CB	5-11	205	Indiana Wesleyan
Cash Cheeks	TE	6-7	245	Northern Colorado
Micah Davey	LB	6-2	235	Michigan
Udoka Ezeani	LB	6-1	215	Boise State
Kelton Farmer	DL	6-4	290	Kentucky Wesleyan
Mason Ferguson	WR	6-0	185	North Texas
Oryend Fisher	DE	6-6	225	West Virginia
Garrett Hawkins	LB	6-3	225	Austin Peay
Ashaad Hall	DE	6-4	235	South Carolina State
Tyler Jones	S	6-0	200	Tennessee State
Kode Lowe	S	6-1	225	West Florida
Jaden McKinney	DL	6-4	285	Austin Peay
Malachi Nelson	QB	6-3	195	Boise State
Terez Reid	CB	5-10	180	Grand Valley State
Aramoni Rhone	WR	6-5	195	Arkansas Pine-Bluff
Mark Robinson	OT	6-5	320	Southeastern
Joshua Rudolph	LB	6-0	225	Indiana
Joshua Thompson	WR	5-10	165	Georgia Southern
Donte Thompson	CB	5-11	175	Texas State
Eric Willis III	WR	5-8	160	PennWest California
Hahsaun Wilson	RB	5-11	190	Charlotte
Jayden Wilson	LB	6-1	220	New Mexico

UNDER THE RADAR**OL MADDOX HUBER**

Huber is a 4A mauler with a steady technique and a frame that projects well at guard or tackle.

He rarely made mistakes and played with advanced control, making him a high-floor addition to UTEP's front. His commitment was a big recruiting win and gives the Miners long-term line stability.

Southland CONFERENCE

BY CORY HOGUE

SOUTHLAND STRIVING TO RECLAIM NATIONAL FCS RESPECT

A false narrative surrounding the quality of football has plagued the Southland Conference since the “Texas 4” (Sam Houston, Abilene Christian, Stephen F. Austin, and UIW) left to form the Western Athletic Conference. Unfortunately, the narrative hasn’t changed despite two of those four teams, UIW and Stephen F. Austin, returning to the conference.

From 2011 to 2019, the SLC had at least two teams qualify for the FCS playoffs. Outside of the 2021 spring season, the conference had at least one at-large selection from 2011 through 2022. Yet UIW was not awarded an at-large bid in 2023 despite being ranked No. 11 in the national polls.

Southeastern Louisiana not receiving an at-large bid last year is just as egregious as UIW being left out of the playoffs two years ago. Three of the Lions’ losses came at the hands of eventual FCS playoff teams ranked in the top 16 in the national polls, and the other two were against FBS foes.

Why the Southland Conference suddenly became viewed as a one-bid league is unknown. The last time the conference had only one team in the playoffs in consecutive seasons was 2006 and 2007.

“This will be my eighth year in the Southland, and I’ve said from the beginning that this is an underrated conference. I’m disappointed we didn’t get in the playoffs last year, but I think it’s the perception of our conference,” SLU head coach Frank Scelfo said. “The top of our league — UIW, Lamar and SFA — is at the top of their game right now. They’re funded right by the university, and they have good NIL packages.”

Coaches across the country recognize the quality of football in the SLC, so what will it take to earn the selection committee’s respect again?

“We must continue to get on the national scene more. But we must do our part when we get on the field against these out-of-conference schools,” Scelfo said. “The head coaches in our conference are making an effort to reach out to other top FCS schools across the country to play a home-and-home series. When we get those games and sign those contracts, we need to win those games.”

The strength of the conference is evident in our preseason predictions. Any of the top five teams have legitimate reasons to believe they can win the SLC this season. Still, UIW will be the team to beat. The Cardinals’ chances are boosted by playing SFA, Lamar, and SLU at home. Legendary head coach Matt Viator returns to McNeese. The Cowboys do not play UIW in the regular season, which could present an interesting tiebreak scenario for the conference office in November.

SFA and Lamar will be major players in the conference and challenge for a playoff bid. The Battle of the Border between McNeese and Lamar could have significant playoff implications. Road contests against McNeese, Lamar, and UIW will determine the strength of SLU’s playoff résumé.

Longtime defensive coordinator Tommy Rybacki was named head coach at Nicholls when Tim Rebowe announced his retirement. The Colonels could make waves in the SLC race with home contests against UIW and McNeese. East Texas A&M will take another step forward in 2025, but the Lions remain one or two years away from the depth necessary to compete for the SLC crown.

Houston Christian could be the dark horse in the SLC this season. The Huskies could surprise the pundits if HCU’s offense explodes under new offensive coordinator Mike Nesbitt and the team defends its home field against SLU, SFA and UIW.

The building process continues at Northwestern State, where head coach Blaine McCorkle has completely rebuilt the roster. Just five players on the Demons’ 2025 roster were members of the previous regime. Coach Travis Bush brings excitement and college football to the starved and rabid fans in the Rio Grande Valley, though on-field success could be limited over the next few years.

Conference PREDICTION

1. UIW
2. STEPHEN F. AUSTIN
3. LAMAR
4. McNEESE
5. SOUTHEASTERN
6. EAST TEXAS A&M
7. NICHOLLS
8. HOUSTON CHRISTIAN
9. NORTHWESTERN STATE
10. UTRGV

Three KEY GAMES

SFA AT UIW, OCTOBER 4

There will be a lot of football left in the season, but this contest will determine the frontrunner for the SLC title.

SOUTHEASTERN AT LAMAR, NOVEMBER 8

This game might not have conference title implications, but this game’s outcome could decide an at-large playoff bid.

LAMAR AT SFA, NOVEMBER 15

The penultimate weekend of the regular season could determine how many seeds the Southland receives in the FCS playoffs.

FIVE PLAYERS TO KNOW

QB RICHARD TORRES, UIW

The Nebraska transfer finally gets his chance to join the UIW quarterback lore in his third year with the program.

QB SAM VIDLAK, SFA

SFA’s playoff chances took a hit when Vidlak was injured last year. A healthy Vidlak could lead to a conference title.

DL KALEB PROCTOR, SOUTHEASTERN

A monster along the line of scrimmage, Proctor tied for second in sacks and was third in tackles for loss last year.

WR CHRISTIAN JOURDAIN, EAST TEXAS A&M

The Lions are the beneficiary of Jourdain getting another season of eligibility after he led ET in receiving last season.

EDGE RAVONTE BLOWE, HOUSTON CHRISTIAN

The Denton Ryan product had an incredible spring, and Jason Bachtel is counting on Blowe to terrorize the opposition.



Kaleb PROCTOR

The leader of the Southeastern Louisiana defense enjoyed a breakout 2024 season and could be one of the best defenders in the SLC this year.

DC
TX

David Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
SOUTHLAND CONFERENCE

2

Photo Credit: SLU Athletics

**BY CORY HOGUE****BACHTEL REBUILDS HCU
WITH TRUSTED RIGHT-HAND MAN**

To say 2024 was a whirlwind for Houston Christian head coach Jason Bachtel would be an understatement.

The chaos began on New Year's Eve, when Braxton Harris departed to become the head coach at Campbell. Four days later, Bachtel was promoted to the top job and immediately dove into building his staff, finalizing the 2024 recruiting class, planning for spring practice, and navigating the spring transfer portal window — all before summer workouts began. Then came fall camp in August, followed by the season itself.

Once the season ended, Bachtel finally had a chance to reflect on his first year as an FCS head coach. The Huskies finished 5–7 overall and 3–4 in the Southland Conference.

Bachtel took responsibility for the inconsistent quarterback play that limited the offense's explosiveness. Still, HCU averaged 355 total yards and 27.6 points per game despite using three quarterbacks due to injuries. CJ Rogers started the season but suffered a lingering hamstring injury. Eli Brickhandler, slowed by a back injury from fall camp, was delayed in his return. That led to redshirt freshman Cutter Stewart starting against SMU (who made the FBS playoffs) and Tarleton (who made the FCS playoffs) in his first two college games.

Reflecting on the season, Bachtel felt the need to define his vision for the program — and that meant stepping back from his offensive coordinator duties. But he wasn't willing to hand over playcalling to just anyone.

"For me to give up playcalling duties, it had to be someone I knew and trusted before my time here," Bachtel said. "I wasn't looking to hire someone to run an offense I didn't know. I wanted to step back from calling plays and coaching the quarterbacks to focus on the guys on the other side of the ball, who I had typically neglected."

So he called Mike Nesbitt, someone he's known for more than two decades. Bachtel was the quarterback and Nesbitt the offensive coordinator at Howard Payne in 2001. The two remained together in 2022 when Bachtel joined Nesbitt on HPU's staff as running backs coach.

"I called Mike and asked him what he was looking for, and he said he wanted to reduce his role if the right opportunity came along," Bachtel said. "I told him I had a quarterbacks coach position open, and I'd give him the offensive coordinator and playcalling duties if he accepted."

Fortunately for Bachtel, Nesbitt was interested

in returning to Texas despite building a highly successful NAIA program at Ottawa (AZ), where he won 51 games in seven seasons.

"We're still figuring out the details of who we want to be as a program," Bachtel said. "But I feel great about where our kids are right now. Hiring a guy like Mike allows me to take a step back and focus on the culture, because our kids need a head coach."

The chance to reflect — and to bring in someone he deeply trusts — has rejuvenated Bachtel. He expects the Huskies to be ready for another challenging schedule in 2025. A new starting quarterback will emerge from a fall camp battle between Trinity Valley transfer Diego Tello and Miami (OH) transfer Maddox Kopp.

Bachtel has also noticed a rare sense of camaraderie among this year's squad. Players are showing up on their own time to meet with coaches, study film, and grow together.

"This group has bought into our standard," he said. "They hold each other accountable, they enjoy being around each other, and they have fun playing football. I think something special is building in 2025."

A six- or seven-win season isn't out of the question for Houston Christian in 2025. The Huskies have a strong chance to win four of their first six games and will host key Southland Conference matchups against Stephen F. Austin and UIW.

Whether HCU meets expectations will largely depend on quarterback play. Last season, five different quarterbacks combined for 18 touchdowns and 12 interceptions. Competing for the starting job are former three-star recruit Maddox Kopp — who saw limited action at Colorado and Miami (OH) — and Diego Tello, whose potential was stifled by a shaky offensive line at Trinity Valley. Head coach Jason Bachtel is expected to add another quarterback following the departure of former Cisco signal-caller Landon Vessell, who entered the transfer portal after spring camp.

**Xavier TOLIVER**

The senior from Mansfield Summit notched 49 tackles and two interceptions for the Huskies last season.

DC
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Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
HOUSTON CHRISTIAN HUSKIES



BY CORY HOGUE

UIW KEEPS QB LEGACY ALIVE WITH TORRES ERA SET TO BEGIN

The University of the Incarnate Word has become a quarterback factory over the past decade. That success began with former Argyle standout Jon Copeland, who led the Cardinals to their first Southland Conference title and FCS playoff appearance while earning Freshman All-American honors in 2018.

You've probably heard of the guy who beat out Copeland for the starting quarterback position in 2020—he was the first player selected in the 2025 NFL Draft. Cameron Ward arrived during the pandemic season and led UIW to its first FCS playoff victory against Stephen F. Austin, falling just short of beating defending national champion Sam Houston a week later. Ward won the Jerry Rice Award, given to the top FCS freshman in the country.

Lindsey Scott followed Ward and left his own legacy. He guided the Cardinals to the FCS semifinals and set a new FCS record with 60 touchdown passes in a season. Scott also won the Walter Payton Award, often referred to as the FCS Heisman.

Zach Calzada took over the past two seasons, leading UIW to 20 wins, its first undefeated Southland Conference season, and a trip to the 2024 FCS quarterfinals. The All-American and reigning Southland Conference Player of the Year will finish his college career in the SEC at Kentucky.

"It's a privilege to play quarterback at the University of the Incarnate Word. The No. 1 pick in the NFL Draft played here for two years, and a Walter Payton Award winner followed him," UIW head coach Clint Killough said. "The last guy to play quarterback here was an All-American and Southland Conference Player of the Year. Now, he's playing in the SEC, so it's a coveted position."

Richard Torres and Weber State transfer Richard Munoz battled throughout spring for the opportunity to lead the UIW offense in 2025. It appears Torres won the job, as Munoz entered the portal in April. Killough had planned to add a quarterback even before Munoz's departure, so filling that spot is now a priority before fall camp.

Still, the offense will look different under Torres.

"(Torres) is a different style from Zach. He doesn't have the big arm, but he's a tremendous operator," Killough said. "He does a good job of going at his speed and speeding up when he wants."

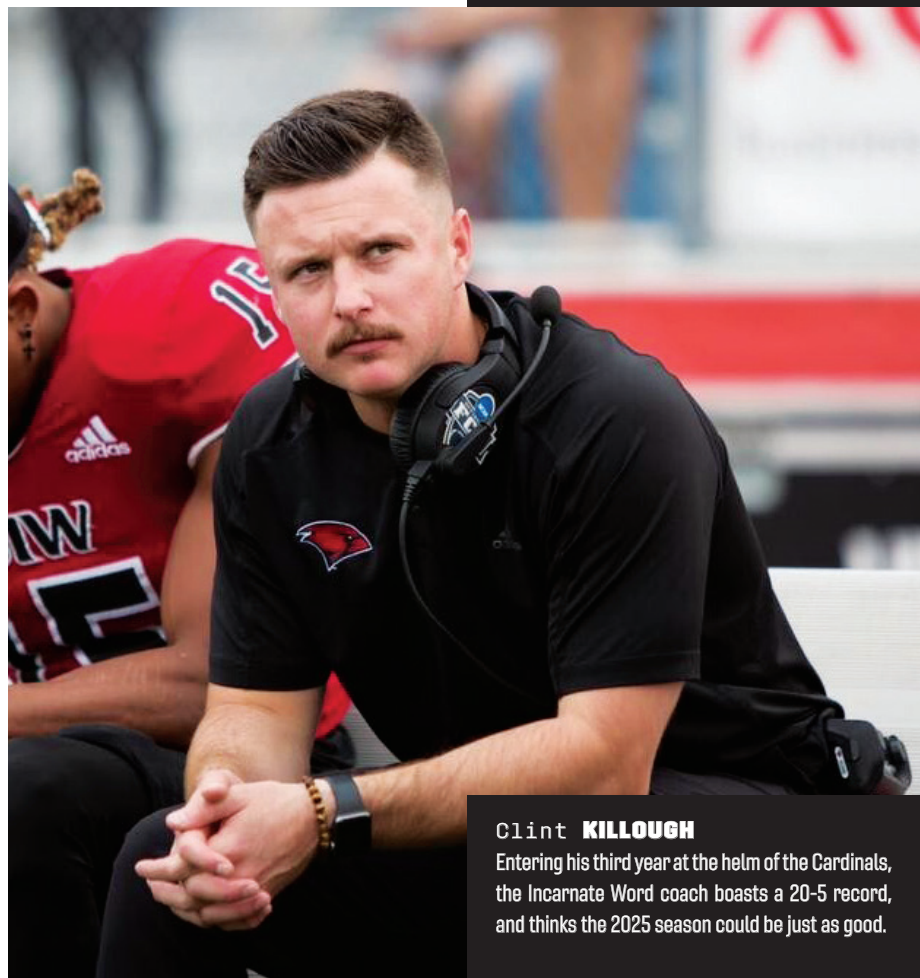
The Cardinals' offense will feature both a new signal-caller and a new play-caller in 2025, as Killough will take over play-calling duties.

UIW canceled its spring game, and many returning starters sat out spring practice while recovering from offseason surgeries. Killough said the program has played a lot of football over the past two years, and the spring allowed younger players to get reps and coaching to build quality depth.

"This spring has been very beneficial for our newcomers, and we're raising our floor with the amount of reps these young guys are getting," Killough said. "The chemistry picked up after our seventh practice. (Defensive coordinator Jim) Gush had his entire defense installed by the third practice, and he loves to compete. I'm over here trying to call plays and install the offense, and he's getting after the head coach by calling zero blitzes. We took our licks on offense this spring."

Killough has been very intentional with his team's direction this offseason — literally.

"We talk a lot about the word north," Killough said. "Everything we want is north of us this year—whether it's a conference title, a playoff game in the Dakotas, or the national title game in Nashville. Every team we play, except UTRGV, is north of us."



Clint **KILLOUGH**

Entering his third year at the helm of the Cardinals, the Incarnate Word coach boasts a 20-5 record, and thinks the 2025 season could be just as good.

DCTF

David Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
INCARNATE WORD CARDINALS



BY CORY HOGUE

ROSSOMANDO EYES RARE TITLE RUN WITH THE CARDINALS

Pete Rossomando has spent more than three decades coaching college football—but he's never seen anything quite like the transfer portal and the era of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL).

"Every day, a guy will come up to me and let me know they got a DM from a Group of Five school," Rossomando said. "There's no shame right now. It's sad because we're in spring practice, and other schools are reaching out to our guys — even players who haven't even thought about entering the portal."

But don't expect excuses from Lamar's head coach. Instead, Rossomando is focused on competing within the system. As a veteran of the coaching carousel, he keeps a running list of potential staff replacements—and he expects his assistants to treat the portal the same way.

"I tell our coaches all the time: if they get caught with their pants down, that's on them," he said. "You need to have a board of portal guys you're already talking to, because we're going to lose players we didn't expect to lose."

Rossomando has won at every stop in his career and continues to adapt to the evolving landscape of college football. His first two seasons in Beaumont produced historic results: Lamar went 7–5 in 2024, marking the program's first back-to-back winning seasons in 57 years.

Granted, the Cardinals shut down football from 1990 to 2009. But even so, Lamar hasn't finished higher than third in conference play since 1974. Under Rossomando, they've finished third in the Southland Conference in both of his seasons—just the fourth and fifth such finishes since the program restarted in 2010.

Even more impressive: the turnaround came while facing a gauntlet of opponents. Rossomando's first three games were against FCS powers Idaho and South Dakota, plus FBS Louisiana-Monroe. The Cardinals went on to win six of their next eight and came one win short of sharing their first conference title since 1971.

Last season, Lamar opened at FBS Texas State before winning its next three home games — including a one-point thriller over No. 20 Weber State — and then traveled to face No. 7 Central Arkansas.

Back-to-back winning seasons are a clear sign the program is trending up, but Rossomando says the ultimate goal remains unmet. Lamar President Dr. Jaime Taylor and Vice President/

Athletic Director Jeff O'Malley have made it clear: the standard is conference championships.

That would be a remarkable achievement for a program that hasn't won an outright league title since 1965.

This year's non-conference slate won't make things easy. The Cardinals will host South Dakota and Central Arkansas and travel to FBS North Texas. But whether they bring the Southland trophy back to Beaumont will likely hinge on their final four games: at UIW, home vs. Southeastern Louisiana, at Stephen F. Austin, and home vs. McNeese State.

"You have to win some of those games. That's the key," Rossomando said. "It's always good to test your guys to get them ready for conference play. We have to win the conference, because that's what our president and AD want — and we've got a lot of work to do."

Winning the Southland and earning the automatic FCS playoff bid won't be easy in a league that's steadily improving. But given how far Rossomando has already taken the Cardinals, an at-large berth might be enough — for now.

What Rossomando has accomplished at Lamar is remarkable. The Cardinals' roster is drastically improved and took another step forward during the offseason. Lamar will be strong along the line of scrimmage, and the team returns a veteran group of offensive linemen. Rossomando noted that the defensive line is deeper, bigger, and more physical than it was in previous seasons.

Whether that leads to a Southland Conference title will depend on Lamar's final two road games of the regular season against powerhouse UIW and a Stephen F. Austin squad that expects to contend for the conference championship and an at-large bid to the playoffs. Still, Lamar's playoff hopes could come down to winning the "Battle of the Border" against McNeese to end the season.



8

Kyndon **FUSELIER**

The Nederland product tied for the team-lead in receptions last year with 31, catching a pair of touchdowns and returning a punt for a score.

DC
TX

Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
LAMAR CARDINALS



BY CORY HOGUE

DOLEZEL'S WAR ROOM FOCUSED ON DEPTH, DEFENSIVE REBUILD

Head coach Clint Dolezel is spending a lot of time in what he calls the "War Room" at East Texas A&M. Picture a basement space filled with depth charts and transfer portal targets — something straight out of an NFL Draft setup — and you're not far off. He admits the room is literally downstairs from his office.

If each season is a war and each game a battle, then the Lions have lost their fair share of battles in Dolezel's first two years at the helm of his alma mater. Still, even casual fans could see meaningful progress from Year 1 to Year 2.

The Lions improved their win total by two in 2024 while playing a brutal schedule. They opened the year with back-to-back trips to California to face FBS San Diego State and No. 18 UC Davis, then returned home to play Grambling and No. 11 Sacramento State before Southland Conference play began.

"The wins didn't show up, but we were leaps and bounds better than the year before," Dolezel said. "Stephen F. Austin beat us by 35 in 2023 — we beat them last year. UC Davis destroyed us two years ago — last year, we were driving to tie the game in the fourth quarter when they returned a pick-six. Now we have to figure out how to win those games."

That corner may have been turning in the final weeks of 2024. ETAMU beat both SFA and Houston Christian in two of its final three games, and nearly upset No. 6 UIW before surrendering 21 unanswered points in the fourth quarter to lose a late lead.

Momentum picked up after the Texas A&M Board of Regents approved the school's name change from Texas A&M-Commerce to East Texas A&M — a change many alumni had wanted since the school joined the A&M System in 1995.

"The name change has been great for us. We're 2-1 since becoming East Texas A&M and were a drive away from 3-0 with a win over the No. 6 team in the country," Dolezel said. "Switching from Under Armour to Nike has also helped. I think we've proven that moving up from Division II to Division I was the right decision."

Things won't get easier in 2025. ETAMU opens with road games against College Football Playoff participant SMU, national powerhouse Florida State, and Grambling. Their first home game won't come until September 27.

The good news: most of the offense returns. The challenge: replacing nine defensive starters.

"We've got the talent, and we signed a strong class in December," Dolezel said. "Now we're on the war board trying to bring in defenders who can help us improve. We'll dissect the portal and find guys who fit. We need starters, backups, and overall depth."

Depth remains a top concern, and Dolezel says the staff will also look to add offensive players this summer.

"We lost a few guys to the portal who didn't want to compete — and that's fine," he said. "But we've got to replace them. If you don't have quality depth, Weeks 5 and 6 can really expose you."

The name change to East Texas A&M was a breath of fresh air, not only because it made sense, but it signaled a change in direction for the university and athletic department. Suddenly, enthusiasm spread across campus, alumni, and the community. The university announced it had received approval to build a \$70 million on-campus event center in March, with plans to have the event center anchor a "campus event district."

Granted, nothing mentioned above directly leads to victories on the football field in 2025, and more improvements are needed at "The Hawk." However, the increased enthusiasm helps with recruiting, and the Lions could finish in the middle of the Southland Conference if they can remain healthy during a brutal early stretch against FBS teams.



2

Ron **PEACE**

The Lions' signal-caller returns to trigger the offense after accounting for nearly 2,600 total yards and 18 scores last season.

Photo Credit: Sara Conner/ETAMU Athletics

DCTF

TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
EAST TEXAS A&M LIONS



BY CORY HOGUE

SFA HOPES CLOSE CALLS
FUEL 2025 BREAKTHROUGH SEASON

On the surface, Stephen F. Austin's 7-5 overall record in 2024 looks like a solid bounce-back campaign after a disappointing 3-8 mark the year before. But head coach Colby Carthel can't help but think about what might have been.

"We found some tough ways to lose games last year," Carthel said. "We had a good year, but we were four plays away from having a great year, and that's been the motivation here. We had a 21-point salute through the offseason. We lost four FCS games by a total of 17 points, so we were 21 points from being 11-1."

Among the heartbreakers was a loss to McNeese, where SFA gave up a Hail Mary touchdown to end the first half. Later, with a chance to go up three scores, a linebacker fumbled a recovered fumble at the five-yard line. The ball bounced through the end zone for a touchback, and McNeese rallied for a 28-24 win, scoring the game-winner with just 31 seconds left.

Five weeks later, the Lumberjacks led Southeastern Louisiana by six with under two minutes remaining after settling for a 40-yard field goal. The Lions marched 75 yards in 13 plays to score the winning touchdown with two seconds remaining.

There was also a controversial fumble return against East Texas A&M that was called a touchdown on the field but overturned upon review. The following week, the Southland Conference issued an apology — but it didn't erase the 19-14 loss.

Then came a gut punch at UIW. Trailing by a touchdown, SFA drove to the 1-yard line, only for a pass to be intercepted. The defender appeared headed for a pick-six before fumbling at midfield. UIW recovered and held on for a seven-point win, all but ending SFA's playoff hopes.

"The ball is oblong, and it'll take some funny bounces. Unfortunately, it bounced away from us a few times last year," Carthel said. "But you either win or you learn. We learned from some of those tough losses, and the team stayed together and kept fighting through the end of the season."

That grit was on full display in the regular-season finale. With nothing to play for, SFA dominated United Athletic Conference champion Abilene Christian, holding the Wildcats to just 35 yards rushing in a 32-19 statement win.

"We had nothing on the line and pistol-whipped a Wildcats team that won their league and went two rounds deep in the playoffs," Carthel said. "That showed what we're capable of

— and we did that with our backup quarterback. It was a really good year, but it wasn't a great year."

Expectations are high for 2025, and for good reason. The Lumberjacks return 10 offensive starters from a unit that ranked 13th nationally in total offense under first-year coordinator Chris Ross. That's especially impressive considering SFA added a new starting quarterback and four new receivers last summer. Defensively, the 'Jacks finished as a top-10 scoring defense in FCS and should be stout again under third-year defensive coordinator Mike Mutz.

Still, the schedule won't do them any favors early. SFA opens on the road at Big 12 member Houston, then travels to face Abilene Christian. The Lumberjacks have won five of the last six meetings against ACU, including a 24-21 victory on their last visit in 2022 that clinched the WAC title. But four of the last six matchups have been decided by one score or less.

"This year's game will be a huge data point for both playoff resumes," Carthel said. "We talked all spring about being ready from the jump. We can't mosey into the season when we've got a Big 12 team and an ACU squad that took North Dakota State to the wire. That's a big one-two punch to start the season."

For the first time in five years, Colby Carthel was not tasked with replacing one of his coordinators. Continuity is key for any college football roster, and the Lumberjacks have plenty of it heading into the 2025 season. SFA has the mix of skill players and depth on both sides of the line of scrimmage to make a run for the Southland Conference title and a playoff bid.

The position groups facing questions heading into fall camp are linebacker and safety, where graduation losses have taken a toll. The Lumberjacks have recruited well at these positions, yet lack experience up the middle of the defense. Look for SFA to add one or two players at these positions from the portal before the start of fall camp.



4

Kylon **HARRIS**

One of the breakout stars for the Lumberjacks, Harris earned all-Southland honors with 87 catches for 1,039 yards and 10 scores.

Photo Credit: Madison Morris

Where Legends Begin

DC
TX

Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
STEPHEN F. AUSTIN LUMBERJACKS



BY CORY HOGUE

UTRGV PRIMED TO RALLY THE VALLEY FOR INAUGURAL SEASON

Something special started brewing at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) when Vice President and Director of Athletics Chasse Conque declared his intention to “Rally the Valley” during his introductory press conference in August 2019.

More than just a catchy hashtag, “Rally the Valley” became a unifying cry for UTRGV and the surrounding Rio Grande Valley (RGV) community. It’s a phrase that now represents pride, momentum, and a shared vision for something bigger. The response has been overwhelming. Vaqueros baseball recently set a new single-season attendance record, and now, anticipation is sky-high for the launch of UTRGV football.

The Vaqueros will kick off their inaugural season on August 30 against Sul Ross State inside the newly enhanced Robert & Janet Vackar Stadium — formerly home to the RGV Toros soccer franchise. Years of groundwork and planning will culminate on a Saturday in Edinburg, with a sold-out crowd ready to witness history.

So, how excited is the Valley for college football? All 6,000 season tickets have sold out, and demand has led UTRGV to add 2,000 general admission seats, 184 premium seats, and 19 loge boxes in the north end zone. It’s a level of early buy-in that most startup programs can only dream of.

Head coach Travis Bush said the support has already made a major impact.

“To know our home games are sold out months before kickoff has been huge in recruiting,” Bush said. “I don’t think fans realize just how much their support is helping. When recruits visit campus, feel the energy, and see the facilities — it’s special. There’s a buzz here that you can’t fake.”

August’s opener will mark the end of a three-year build for Bush and his staff. The process began with assembling a coaching staff and building a roster capable of practicing for a full year without playing a game. That included everything from implementing systems to managing the physical and emotional development of a roster that had never played a down together.

Their initial goal was to bring in 60 players last year. They ended up closing the roster at 90, including 75 true freshmen, despite having only 17 scholarships. An additional 25 midyear transfers helped balance out the depth chart and raise the competition level across the board.

“The caliber of some of the freshmen we landed — guys who’d normally get scholarships at this level—was impressive,” Bush said. “And we were pleasantly surprised by the transfer talent we added. Everything is trending in a positive direction.”

One of those transfers is a local legend: former UTSA quarterback and Sharyland Pioneer star Eddie Lee Marburger. The 2020 Whataburger Super Team selection — who holds the RGV’s all-time passing touchdowns record — has quickly asserted himself as the team’s offensive leader.

“He’s exceeded our expectations,” Bush said. “We knew he could play, but he came in, learned the offense quickly, and had total command by the end of spring ball. He’s creating explosive plays, and his leadership and maturity have been a huge asset.”

As for on-field expectations, Bush remains cautious — but optimistic.

“Honestly, I don’t know yet what to expect this year. Once we see our final roster and get into camp, we’ll have a better idea,” he said. “Everyone says it’s a process, and we understand that. But the transfer portal gives us a real shot to build faster than most startups. If we can balance the roster with experienced upperclassmen and bring the team together, we think we can win sooner than people expect.”

It’s challenging to think of a better resume to start the UTRGV program than Travis Bush. His father, Bruce, is a member of the RGV Sports Hall of Fame, and Bush was a key member of Larry Coker’s staff when UTSA started its program in 2010. Bush noted that UTRGV has the best setup for a startup football program, considering they have the resources and facilities that were initially missing at UTSA.

Still, it will take some time for UTRGV to be competitive in the Southland Conference. But when the Vaqueros are competitive, the Rio Grande Valley will be electric, and UTRGV will already own one of the best home-field advantages in FCS this season. That alone will lead to a few wins.



Travis BUSH

It’s been a three-year build for the UTRGV coach to get the Vaqueros ready for Saturdays, and the time is finally here to show out for the RGV.

DCTF

DAVE CAMPBELL'S
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
UTRGV VAQUEROS

United Athletic CONFERENCE

BY CORY HOGUE

UAC LOOKS TO BUILD ON BREAKTHROUGH 2024 SEASON

The expectation, since the Atlantic Sun and Western Athletic Conferences merged to form the United Athletic Conference, was to challenge the Missouri Valley Football Conference and Big Sky Conference for FCS supremacy. While the UAC has yet to reach the level of the top conferences, it took a significant step forward in 2024.

The UAC placed three teams in the FCS playoffs, tying with the Ohio Valley Conference and Big South Football Association and trailing only the Big Sky (5), MVFC (4), and Coastal Athletic Association (4). Abilene Christian and Tarleton earned playoff bids for the first time in program history. Both won in the first round before falling in road games against MVFC powers — North Dakota State and South Dakota, respectively. Eastern Kentucky made its 23rd playoff appearance but lost a first-round road game to Villanova of the CAA.

Abilene Christian earned the UAC's automatic bid with a road win over the Texans and hope to repeat in 2025. However, they must replace seven offensive starters while breaking in their fourth offensive coordinator in head coach Keith Patterson's fourth season. Tarleton lost several key offensive contributors and the entire offensive line but returns quarterback Victor Gabalis, who enters his third season as the starter. Still, expectations in Stephenville remain high: contend for the conference title and return to the playoffs.

Eastern Kentucky head coach Walt Wells said consistency will be the key to his team's success in 2025 after ECU lost two of its first three conference games before winning five straight to close the regular season. Southern Utah was ravaged by injuries last year, losing nine offensive starters. Head coach DeLane Fitzgerald said

all nine will return in 2025, along with many defensive starters, giving the Thunderbirds title aspirations after finishing 6-2 in conference play.

Four straight losses to end 2024 forced Central Arkansas head coach Nate Brown to evaluate what the Bears needed. Brown will take over as offensive coordinator and play-caller in 2025 and has brought back Chad Williams as defensive coordinator. Williams spent the past four years at Southern Miss and previously held the same role at UCA in 2019 and 2020.

Austin Peay head coach Jeff Faris spent the spring emphasizing discipline and finishing, after the Governors came three plays away from a conference title despite replacing over 50 scholarship players last season. Faris said they addressed offensive line needs during the December signing period and retained the core of last year's roster.

A 3-9 record in 2024 didn't reflect the progress made by North Alabama under Brent Dearmon. The Lions lost three one-score games, including to ranked teams Illinois State and Eastern Kentucky, and beat UAC champion ACU. Dearmon said consistent quarterback play — after using four starters in 2024 — will be the key to another step forward.

Joel Taylor's first season at West Georgia opened with a win over Samford. The Wolves' other three wins came in the final five games, which Taylor attributed to young players finally settling in. He believes that experience will carry over as UWG continues its transition to FCS.

Utah Tech head coach Lance Anderson's first year was hindered by eight Academic Progress Rate (APR) penalties inherited from the previous regime, including the loss of one full practice day per week. His focus now is on improving roster talent ahead of a 2025 schedule that opens with UC Davis, Northern Arizona, and Idaho — three 2024 FCS playoff teams.

FIVE PLAYERS TO KNOW

QB VICTOR GABALIS, TARLETON
Gabalis enters his third season as Tarleton's starting quarterback with hopes of leading the Texans back to the FCS playoffs.

DL JEREMIAH BAILEY, ECU
Bailey is an All-American caliber defensive lineman who has remained with the Colonels despite receiving interest from FBS programs.

RB JORDON VAUGHN, ACU
The Manvel native impressed head coach Keith Patterson during spring practice and brings a physical presence to the Wildcats' rushing attack.

DT BRADLEY CLARK, UCA
Nathan Brown said the 6-foot-2, 320-pound Clark is the best defensive tackle in FCS, and possibly all of college football.

QB BRONSON BARRON, SUU
The Weber State transfer was productive for the Thunderbirds before having his season derailed by injuries after six games.

PREDICTION

1. EASTERN KENTUCKY
2. TARLETON
3. SOUTHERN UTAH
4. CENTRAL ARKANSAS
5. ABILENE CHRISTIAN
6. AUSTIN PEAY
7. NORTH ALABAMA
8. WEST GEORGIA
9. UTAH TECH

Three KEY GAMES

TARLETON AT EASTERN KENTUCKY, OCTOBER 25

The winner likely decides the 2025 UAC champion, with the Texans seeking revenge for a 2024 home loss to the Colonels.

TARLETON AT ABILENE CHRISTIAN, NOVEMBER 1:

Wildcats won the 2024 UAC title by beating the Texans in Stephenville. Emotions will run high for the rematch in Abilene.

SOUTHERN UTAH AT EASTERN KENTUCKY, NOVEMBER 8

This game will factor into who wins the conference race and could also determine an at-large bid to the playoffs.



Landen CHAMBERS

The standout Keller Fossil Ridge product should see an increased role in North Alabama's offense in 2025.

Photo Credit: UNA Athletics

Where Legends Begin

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TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
UNITED ATHLETIC CONFERENCE



BY CORY HOGUE

HARRELL JOINS ACU AS WILDCATS AIM TO DEFEND UAC TITLE

Abilene Christian head coach Keith Patterson has developed a reputation for identifying and elevating quality young coaches. Since arriving in Abilene three years ago, Patterson has watched several staffers rise through the coaching ranks.

Defensive coaches Skyler Cassity, Julian Wilson, and Jarred Holley have all moved on to bigger jobs — Cassity eventually landed at North Texas, where Wilson joined him this year, and Holley took over as defensive backs coach at Marshall.

Even Patterson's support staff has drawn national attention. Former strength and conditioning coaches Corey Smith and Luke Lancaster earned positions in the NFL with the New York Jets and New Orleans Saints, respectively.

One position that's seen the most turnover under Patterson has been offensive coordinator. After a breakout 2024 season in which ACU's offense averaged nearly 34 points per game — an eight-point jump from 2023 — OC Rick Bowie departed for Western Kentucky. That made it four offensive coordinators in four years for the Wildcats.

To fill the latest vacancy, Patterson hired a Texas football legend: Graham Harrell. The former Texas Tech quarterback and recent College Football Hall of Fame inductee brings instant credibility, but Patterson is more excited about his coaching chops than his name recognition.

"I love Rick to death — he was perfect for us last season," Patterson said. "But I believe Graham Harrell is the right guy moving forward, and I don't just say that because of his name. He has self-confidence and a competitive spirit. It's easy to see why he's been successful as both a player and a coach."

Harrell's background is loaded with elite influences. His father, Sam, is a respected Texas high school coach who worked under the legendary Gordon Wood. His college coach, Mike Leach, revolutionized college football with the Air Raid offense. As a coach, Harrell's résumé includes time under Mike Gundy at Oklahoma State, Dana Holgorsen at West Virginia, and another stint with Leach at Washington State.

"I've been around a lot of coaches, and this guy brings the intensity," Patterson said. "It's almost like having a defensive coach on offense. He coaches his guys hard, and he's the right guy at the right time for this program."

Harrell will face a challenge out of the gate: replacing quarterback Maverick McIvor, who followed Bowie to Western Kentucky after leading

ACU to its first United Athletic Conference (UAC) title and FCS playoff appearance.

Still, the Wildcats have options. Stone Earle returns to Abilene after stints at North Texas and Marshall. Earle started seven games for ACU in 2021 before suffering an injury. He'll compete with Troy transfer Quayde Hawkins and Tulane transfer Carson Haggard—who led ACU to its first FCS playoff win over Northern Arizona last year when McIvor was sidelined with a concussion.

Fans can also expect more new faces on offense, as the Wildcats replace seven starters in 2025. But Patterson remains confident. He believes if ACU can recapture the consistency it showed last season, the team has the talent to repeat as UAC champions.

On the defensive side, Patterson is especially optimistic. He expects the 2025 unit to be the best he's had.

The defense made a statement in the FCS playoffs with a shutout win over Northern Arizona, a game Patterson called one of the best defensive performances he's ever seen. In the second round, the Wildcats trailed eventual national champion North Dakota State by just three points at halftime before turnovers doomed them in the second half.

Still, Patterson views the playoff run as invaluable experience.

"We weren't intimidated at all," he said. "Our kids went out and competed, and you need to go through something like that to understand what it takes to win at that level. You're not going to go in there and knock them out without playing a complete game."

ACU fans should be overjoyed to see them fifth in the UAC predictions, considering they earned the program's first conference title and playoff appearance since transitioning to FCS after being placed fifth in last year's magazine predictions.

Still, replacing seven starters on offense, including three of the five offensive linemen and multiple skill players, while learning a new scheme under a new offensive coordinator for the fourth consecutive year is a significant challenge.

While Patterson believes the defense is further along this year than in previous years, the Wildcats replace both starting safeties, the SAM linebacker, and two defensive tackles. Add the doubts together, and Patterson is likely to lead ACU to the FCS national championship game in Nashville this year based on our previous predictions.



Abilene **CHRISTIAN**

The Wildcats brought home their first UAC championship and earned the program's first berth in the FCS playoffs last season.

DCTF

David Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
ABILENE CHRISTIAN WILDCATS

Tarleton State **TEXANS**



DCTF'S TAKE

BY CORY HOGUE

WHITTEN, TEXANS SET SIGHTS ON EVEN BIGGER THINGS IN 2025

Tarleton State takes pride in its rich traditions, whether you're talking about founder John Tarleton, the Purple Poo (Texas' oldest spirit organization), the legend of the Texan Rider, or Duck Camp. That pride extends to the football program, which traces its history back to 1899 and includes legendary coaches like W.J. Wisdom, Earl Rudder, and Buddy Fornes.

It's time to add Todd Whitten's name to that list.

Now in his 21st season as a head coach — and 16th at Tarleton — Whitten is the program's all-time winningest coach, with 114 of his 139 career victories coming in Stephenville. He's twice revitalized the Texans, including guiding them through one of the most successful transitions from NCAA Division II to Division I and the FCS in recent memory.

That journey hasn't been without its challenges. Whitten was considered on the hot seat in 2022 despite back-to-back six-win seasons during the transition.

But in 2024, he cemented his legacy by leading Tarleton to its first FCS playoff appearance in the program's first year of eligibility—and delivered a home playoff win in the opening round. If the newly installed turf at Memorial Stadium had read "Todd Whitten Field," few would have objected.

Whitten, however, isn't interested in legacy talk.

"The goal is always to keep improving. We have another good football team this year, but winning games is hard," he said. "You need some good fortune, but you create that by recruiting hard. You've got to have good players and coach them well. We're blessed with an awesome staff—those guys work, recruit, and coach their tails off."

He credits the program's growth to staff continuity, which has allowed players to hear a steady message year after year.

That consistency showed in last season's playoff run, even in defeat. Tarleton fell in the second round to No. 4 South Dakota, but the game provided a valuable benchmark.

"Seeing South Dakota up close along the line of scrimmage was another lesson learned," Whitten said. "We had the skill guys to compete, but they could push us around a bit more. So, continuing to build depth and strength on both sides of the line has to be a priority."

The Texans will look different in 2025, especially on offense. Star running back Kayvon

Britten and wide receiver Darius Cooper are both chasing NFL dreams. But the Texans return one of their most important pieces: quarterback Victor Gabalis.

"Anytime you have a third-year starting quarterback, you have a chance to be good," Whitten said. "Victor throws it as well as anyone we've had here, and I think we'll see his best football this fall."

Reaching another 10-win season won't be easy. Tarleton opens with road trips to Portland State and Army before hosting Mississippi Valley State. UAC play opens on the road at Central Arkansas, followed by a tough home game against Chattanooga to close the non-conference slate.

"It'll be tough going from one coast to the other on a short week," Whitten said. "But that's what we want. We want to be tested early so we're ready for conference play. You've got to win on the road to win this league."

You'd be hard-pressed to name a more consistent program since 2018 among Texas Division I and Division II schools than Tarleton. That's because you can't. The Texans are the only program in that category to post seven consecutive winning seasons. It's been nearly a decade since Tarleton finished with a record below .500, which was Whitten's first season of his second stint leading the program in 2016.

Still, Tarleton hasn't won a conference title since transitioning to FCS. The Texans have a good chance to win the UAC trophy in 2025. The main question facing Tarleton this season is along the offensive line, where no starters return. How quickly the offensive line jells will determine whether the Texans set more program history this year.

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Victor GABALIS

The Tarleton signal-caller returns after an injury-riddled 2024 season, hopeful to spark the Texans to a conference title run.

Photo Credit: Leslie Herold

DC
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Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
TARLETON STATE TEXANS

Southwestern Athletic **CONFERENCE**

BY CORY HOGUE

JACKSON STATE LEADS SWAC AMID COACHING SHAKEUPS

It's been quite a ride for Jackson State football since Deion Sanders was named head coach in 2020. Sanders brought national attention to the Southwestern Athletic Conference and Historically Black Colleges and Universities, energizing multiple fan bases, raising standards, and increasing scrutiny.

Still, a Celebration Bowl victory eluded JSU during Sanders' tenure. That hurdle was cleared last year when the Tigers defeated South Carolina State to claim the 2024 HBCU national championship — their first since 1996. All signs point to JSU being the favorite to repeat in 2025.

Three teams made splashy head coaching hires. Alabama A&M brought in Sam Shade, an eight-year NFL veteran who transitioned into coaching as a volunteer at Briarwood Christian in Alabama. Shade turned Miles from a 1-9 team into a 10-3 playoff team in three seasons. He's focused on building culture and recruiting in Year 1.

Former NFL star Terrell Buckley was hired at Mississippi Valley State, where he hopes to resurrect the Delta Devils program. Prairie View A&M also dipped into the Division II ranks, hiring Tremaine Jackson after he led Valdosta State to the DII national championship game. While much of the attention has been on Jackson's bravado, PVAMU's strong transfer class should make waves in the SWAC.

Cris Dishman isn't lowering expectations at Texas Southern entering Year 2. The Tigers have the same four goals every year: beat Prairie View, win the SWAC West, win the SWAC title game, and win the Celebration Bowl. The key will be steady quarterback play, with returners KJ Cooper and Jordon Davis

batting JUCO transfer Cameron McCalister in fall camp.

At Grambling, Mickey Joseph redshirted 23 freshmen in Year 1 and turned to veteran additions in his latest recruiting class. Joseph said the Tigers aim to add depth along both lines before fall camp — ideally signing two offensive tackles, two defensive tackles, and two edge rushers.

Alcorn State had a solid debut under Cedric Thomas, finishing second in the West. But the Braves face a tough schedule with road trips to Florida A&M and Jackson State, the top two teams in the East. Arkansas-Pine Bluff started strong in 2024 but faded with four straight losses. Coach Alonzo Hampton believes the Lions are poised to take a step forward in 2025 with improved depth.

Still, the West runs through Southern. The Jaguars are favored to repeat as division champs and return to the SWAC title game. Some fans were skeptical of head coach Terrence Graves' lack of experience, but he quickly proved himself by leading Southern to a third straight Bayou Classic win and a conference title game appearance.

Graves isn't handing out starting roles heading into fall camp — including at quarterback, where East Mississippi transfer Jamari Jones is competing with sophomore Jalen Woods, who showed signs of maturity in the spring.

The SWAC championship could be a 2024 rematch unless Alabama State or Florida A&M can knock off Jackson State. The Rattlers have a favorable path, hosting both ASU and JSU. Bethune-Cookman aims to show progress in Year 3 under Raymond Woodie Jr.

FIVE PLAYERS TO KNOW

TE TAVARIOUS GRIFFIN, ALCORN STATE

"The Truck" was the leading receiver for the Braves in 2024 and added 194 yards and five touchdowns on 11 rushing attempts.

WR NATHAN REMBERT, JACKSON STATE

The 2024 All-SWAC selection at Mississippi Valley State will suit up for the Tigers after averaging nearly 15 yards per reception.

RB LAMAGEA MCDOWELL, PRAIRIE VIEW A&M

The Panthers expect big things from their leading rusher last season. He is a load for defenses to tackle.

EDGE CKELBY GIVENS, SOUTHERN

The All-American and SWAC co-Defensive Player of the Year terrorized opponents with 12 sacks and 27.5 tackles for loss in 2024.

LB JACOB WILLIAMS, TEXAS SOUTHERN

The Tigers will benefit from the return of their senior leader and quarterback of the defense from an early-season injury in 2024.

Three **KEY GAMES**

PRAIRIE VIEW A&M AT TEXAS SOUTHERN, AUGUST 30

The Labor Day Classic doesn't need added intrigue, but Shell Energy Stadium will be buzzing before Tremaine Jackson's debut.

PRAIRIE VIEW A&M AT SOUTHERN, OCTOBER 18

The winner will be in the driver's seat to win the SWAC West Division and a chance at claiming the conference title.

JACKSON STATE AT FLORIDA A&M, NOVEMBER 1

This is likely the final test in 2025, with the winner likely to earn a spot in the SWAC championship game.



Tavarious "Truck" **GRIFFIN**

One of the true stars of the SWAC, Griffin earned first-team all-conference honors after a monster 2024 season.

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SWAC



BY CORY HOGUE

TREMAINE JACKSON AIMS TO REWRITE PRAIRIE VIEW'S LEGACY

The Prairie View A&M football program has a passionate fan base that wants the Panthers to succeed on the gridiron. That passion is one reason PVAMU chose not to renew Bubba McDowell's contract. Finishing 5-7 overall and 3-5 in conference play in 2024 wasn't enough for the administration — despite the former Houston Oiler standout leading the Panthers to the SWAC West title in 2023.

However, everyone — including the fan base — was surprised when Tremaine Jackson was named head coach and immediately started talking about winning SWAC and HBCU national championships during his introductory press conference. It wasn't coachspeak then, and Jackson has only reinforced his confidence since arriving on campus.

"Now that I've been here three months, my expectations are even higher than when I walked in the door because I'm here and I see what this place can become," Jackson said. "We can win the SWAC West, we can win the SWAC championship, and we can compete in Atlanta to win the whole thing."

"We can do that extremely fast — but not in such a hurry that we make missteps with the program. I tell our coaches all the time that the expectations are high, and not from anyone else but us."

The fan base has responded positively to Jackson's bravado. Still, he hears the detractors.

"I'm not sure our fans really believe we can get that done in Year 1. I think they want us to — because it's good for them to talk noise to other people who went to other schools," Jackson said. "But I hear the chatter about how it normally takes me until Year Three to win. If you think it's going to take me until Year Three to win here, I'm a white man."

The Prairie View A&M football program has a proud history, highlighted by five HBCU national championships. But the Panthers' last national title came in 1964. Since then, the program has gone 201-415-5 and holds the distinction of the longest losing streak in college football history — 78 consecutive games. The Panthers shut down the program in 1990, reopened it in 1991 with no scholarships or meaningful funding, and didn't win again until 1998.

"After the 1964 national championship team, it was all losing until Coach (Henry) Frazier walked in here in 2009 and won the SWAC championship," Jackson said. "Still, we haven't won since then. We've always been consistently 7-5 or 8-4, and maybe get to the

SWAC championship game and get beat up. So, when you're dealing with a program that's known more for losing than winning, why would our fans be excited?"

Jackson is used to blazing new trails. He's spent his entire career as an NCAA Division II head coach on one-year contracts and is the first and only Black head football coach at both of his previous stops — Colorado Mesa and Valdosta State.

"They like the hype, but they've never seen people kissing trophies around here. The fans who attend homecoming have never seen a winning team. When they were at Prairie View, we were 0-78," Jackson said. "When something's been mediocre your whole life, why would you believe it'll be different? It's like a preacher telling you that you're going to get a blessing when you've never been blessed."

Still, Jackson said he'll welcome every fan once the Panthers start "kissing trophies" — and he'll even let fans kiss the trophy... for a donation.

"There'll be a little QR code to donate before you kiss the trophy, because this place deserves to be talked about among the best schools in the state," Jackson said. "When you discuss the best football programs in Texas, you'll be talking about the Panthers. I don't know how long it'll take us to get there, but before I leave this place, the expectation will be to play in Atlanta every December."



Cameron **PETERS**

The senior from Stafford appeared in eight games last season and should play a huge role for Prairie View in coach Tremaine Jackson's first season.

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PRAIRIE VIEW A&M PANTHERS



BY CORY HOGUE

DISHMAN INSTILLS TOUGH CULTURE, HIGH HOPES FOR THE TIGERS

Cris Dishman has high expectations for the Texas Southern football program. He's seen his share of coaching philosophies — and plenty of wins and losses — during his 30 years in the game. The former Houston Oilers cornerback spent 13 seasons in the NFL playing under multiple head coaches, including Jerry Glanville and Jack Pardee with the Oilers, and Dennis Green during his final season in Minnesota.

Add to that the 17 years Dishman spent as an assistant coach at 10 different stops — including stints in the NFL (San Diego and Arizona), NFL Europe (Berlin), CFL (Montreal), USFL (New Jersey), XFL (Vegas), NCAA Division I (Baylor), Division II (Menlo College), and high school (IMG Academy)—and it's easy to see why he exudes confidence in establishing his culture at Texas Southern. He's seen almost everything football has to offer.

Dishman draws inspiration from his most successful teams — the 1993 Oilers and 1999 Washington Redskins — to guide how he builds his program.

"We have great leadership in our senior class and brought in some guys from the portal who will help with our leadership. Establishing a culture starts with the players. The best teams I was on were the '93 Oilers and '99 Redskins," Dishman said. "They were player-led teams, and the coaches managed. That's what we're trying to establish here. The players have to hold each other accountable — not just at practice, but in the classroom, dorms, showing respect to women on campus, and being leaders in the community."

To help build that player-led culture, Dishman has instituted a leadership council—something he first saw while playing for Norv Turner in Washington.

"We have some guys who are hungry and dedicated to their craft during the offseason. Some took the time to lose weight, gain muscle, and get faster," Dishman said. "We're on a mission, and I think everybody is buying in now. The guys not buying in will be left on the sidelines, and we're letting our leadership council make those decisions. They're the ones telling us who's not buying in or making the wrong decisions off the field."

For anyone questioning Dishman's seriousness about academic performance, he's set an ambitious goal for the team when the NCAA releases its Academic Progress Rate (APR) report.

"Right now, everybody should be focused on getting their grades up and helping improve our APR and GPA. My goal this year is to attain a 1,000 APR," Dishman said. "People keep telling us we can't do it because we have so many players, but I'm challenging the players to take on that mission."

Dishman believes emphasizing consistent performance in the classroom will build habits players carry into meeting rooms and onto the field.

On the field, the Tigers will have a new starting quarterback in 2025, with three players competing for the job. Staying on message, Dishman said "whoever steps up and takes ownership of being the leader of the team" will win the battle. He's optimistic about the supporting cast.

"We're very excited about the pieces we have at receiver," Dishman said. "Our running backs did a great job during the spring of running hard and not allowing the first guy to make the tackle."

Dishman hasn't wavered in the goals he set when he took over the program.

"We can be competitive in the SWAC this year. Our goals remain the same: Beat Prairie View A&M, win the West Division, win the SWAC, and win in Atlanta," Dishman said. "Those four goals will always remain the same."

Cris Dishman is building a football program on a foundation that he hopes will last, for a program whose last conference title, not vacated, was in 1968. Make no mistake, Dishman is serious about achieving all four of the goals he's set for the team this year. TSU accomplished the goal of defeating Prairie View A&M in Dishman's first year as a head coach. Their five victories tied the 2014 and 2022 teams for most wins since 2010.

Achieving all four of their goals — beating Prairie View, winning the West, winning the SWAC and winning the Celebration Bowl — in 2025 will be a significant challenge for the Tigers. However, they have a favorable conference schedule this year as they avoid SWAC East Division favorites Jackson State and Florida A&M, and could make a run at the West Division title.

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Jacob **WILLIAMS**

After an injury-riddled 2024 season, Williams returns alongside Isaiah Bogerty to anchor what could be the SWAC's finest linebacker corps.

Photo Credit: Tort Alvarado

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Lone Star CONFERENCE

BY CORY HOGUE

LSC COACHES LOOK TO RESET ,RELOAD AND RISE IN 2025

ANGELO STATE

Coach: Jeff Girsch (7th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 8/4. **2024:** 9-3, 9-0 LSC

Angelo State secured the program's second conference championship in the last three years by finishing undefeated against LSC competition. Last season, the question was the Rams' offense, which had many new faces. This year, the defense is the question, which has Jeff Girsch assuring supporters that his program is built to reload, not rebuild.

"Some people at a Ram Club event the other day asked how we were going to replace guys like Eric Rascoe, Andrew Pitts, and others on defense. I reminded them that they were asking the same question about the offense last year," Girsch said. "They didn't know Braeden Fuller and the other guys who were good players for us because they've been developing in our program."

The Rams' defense will be tested early against non-conference foes Fort Hays State and Emporia State, but will have time to improve before playing the top teams in the conference.

CENTRAL WASHINGTON

Coach: Chris Fisk (7th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 3/2. **2024:** 8-4, 7-2 LSC

When the Wildcats made the NCAA Division II playoffs in 2024, it marked the first time the program had made consecutive playoff appearances since making three straight appearances from 2007 to 2009. However, matching the program record for consecutive DII playoff appearances will be challenging for a Central Washington squad replacing many starters on both sides of the ball.

"We're not afraid of youth. We've been convinced that we have to surf the portal, but the portal doesn't always supply you with answers. Sometimes, it's your next problem," CWU head coach Chris Fisk said. "It's about finding the guys that fit your culture and program because it only takes one guy to tear the whole thing down."

Three-year starter Kennedy McGill and All-American center Slade Edwards will lead the offense. Fisk said that many of the new starters on defense have extensive playing time, as CWU uses a heavy rotation during games.

EASTERN NEW MEXICO

Coach: Kelley Lee (3rd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 8/9. **2024:** 3-8, 1-8 LSC

Head coach Kelley Lee's second season in his second stint leading the Greyhounds began with two victories and a six-point loss to eventual LSC champion Angelo State. However, ENMU

proceeded to lose seven of its final eight games and finished with two fewer wins than in the 2023 season. Lee's first tour of duty leading the Greyhounds resulted in three fewer wins than the previous season.

ENMU will need its defense to improve after allowing over 37 points per game in 2024. Austin Bortle was named defensive coordinator during the offseason, and Lee has been impressed with how quickly the players are adjusting to the new scheme.

"(Bortle) is an outstanding coach with experience as both a head coach and a defensive coordinator," Lee said in a press release. "Our players are picking up the new scheme faster than expected, which is a testament to his knowledge and teaching ability."

MIDWESTERN STATE

Coach: Rich Renner (2nd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 4/4. **2024:** 4-7, 3-6 LSC

Few know the Midwestern State football program better than Rich Renner, who spent a total of 17 years, including 15 as defensive coordinator, with the Mustangs before being named head coach when Bill Maskill retired in 2023. Renner said his first season as a head coach in his career was a learning experience, and he admits to making a few mistakes.

"I made a lot of mistakes in my first year, and I made mistakes because I didn't know what I didn't know. I was probably too nice, too lenient, and too forgiving last year, and that led us to a 4-7 record," Renner said. "I need to be more hands-on this year, and I'll be more in control this season."

One change Renner made was at offensive coordinator, where former Texas Tech assistant coach Kirk Bryant was added to the staff to improve MSU's passing attack while keeping the offense balanced.

SUL ROSS STATE

Coach: Lee Hays (1st season). **Starters returning O/D:** 6/3. **2024:** 3-8, 2-7 LSC

Lee Hays is no stranger to the Lone Star Conference, having spent the first nine years moving between Texas A&M-Kingsville and West Texas A&M. While college football has changed since his last year in the LSC at WT in 2005, Hays believes the recipe for winning in NCAA Division II hasn't changed.

"I firmly believe the one thing you can do in Division II is outwork people. Even if you have limited resources, you can get in your car and outwork people," Hays said. "There are a lot of high school kids now that aren't getting recruited, and if you put in the time and do the evaluations, then you have a chance to find some good players."

Hays said he will serve as offensive coordinator and call plays. This decision allows him to add a

THREE KEY GAMES

UTPB AT A&M-KINGSVILLE, SEPT. 20

The conference opener will be electric, with the winner taking a massive step toward the LSC title.

A&M-KINGSVILLE AT CENTRAL WASHINGTON, OCT. 18

The schedule is brutal for the Javelinas, and this road game might be their biggest test this season.

ANGELO STATE AT CENTRAL WASHINGTON, NOV. 1

This series is a close game every year, with an average margin of victory of 4.7 points in their four previous meetings.

PREDICTION

1. CENTRAL WASHINGTON
2. TEXAS A&M-KINGSVILLE
3. ANGELO STATE
4. UTPB
5. WEST TEXAS A&M
6. MIDWESTERN STATE
7. EASTERN NEW MEXICO
8. WESTERN OREGON
9. WESTERN NEW MEXICO
10. SUL ROSS STATE



Braeden FULLER

After guiding Angelo State to the Lone Star Conference title last season, the Floresville product is anxious to make it a Ram repeat.

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OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR/QB'S COACH

**BRADLEY
WILSON**



ON BEING NAMED A DAVE CAMPBELL'S
TEXAS FOOTBALL MAGAZINE 40 UNDER 40 RECIPIENT



Lone Star CONFERENCE

couple of assistant coaches he couldn't otherwise afford with limited resources.

TEXAS A&M-KINGSVILLE

Coach: Scott Parr (1st season). **Starters returning O/D:** 3/8. **2024:** 7-4, 6-3 LSC

Some pundits argued that the offense was responsible for keeping the Javelinas from winning the LSC championship or earning a playoff bid in recent years. So, former head coach Michael Salinas hired Scott Parr, a man known for producing explosive offenses, to lead the team as Salinas transitioned to full-time athletic director.

To his credit, Parr isn't shying away from high expectations.

"It's been a long time since I was (a coach) in this conference, but I know it doesn't matter what level you're playing, you need good players and the right mentality. There are a lot of ingredients here," Parr said. "Now, we have to take advantage of this summer to improve the roster to allow us to be prevalent in the conference race this year."

Louisiana Tech transfer Jack Turner is expected to be the starting quarterback. Still, Parr hopes to add a few playmakers at wide receiver before fall camp.

UT PERMIAN BASIN

Coach: Kris McCullough (3rd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 3/9. **2024:** 7-5, 6-3 LSC

Kris McCullough's first season at UTPB produced many historic firsts, including the Falcons' first LSC championship and appearance in the DII playoffs. While his second season didn't produce the same results, the Falcons still earned a bid to the Fun Town RV Heritage Bowl, marking the program's first consecutive postseason appearances in program history.

McCullough said there are two keys for the Falcons to return to the top of the LSC and earn another playoff appearance.

"One key is having the leadership in the locker room to take over the program where it's a player-led team and not my team. I didn't have that last year. The second key is staying healthy. We lost seven starters by Week 5 a year ago, and that hurt us," McCullough said. "From a leadership and culture standpoint, this is the best we've had since I arrived. Now, we need to stay healthy."

WEST TEXAS A&M

Coach: Josh Lynn (3rd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 6/6. **2024:** 5-6, 5-4 LSC

It was a tumultuous offseason for West Texas A&M. Head coach Josh Lynn was penalized by the NCAA for major recruiting violations. Additionally, the Buffaloes will have two new coordinators. Defensive coordinator Levi Gallas was named head coach at Adams State. Lynn promoted Justin Richter to lead the defense

and hired former Central Missouri offensive coordinator Justin Bane to lead the offense.

"Richter is a proven coordinator in Division II, and it's nice to have someone who can slide right in when someone leaves. We'll be a bit different schematically, and have more four-man fronts," Lynn said. "Bane had one of the top offenses in Division II, and possibly any level. He brings a different approach schematically, and will keep things very simple and detailed."

Lynn said four players are competing to be the starting quarterback and noted the Buffs look to add depth at wide receiver and linebacker over the summer.

WESTERN NEW MEXICO

Coach: Billy Hickman (3rd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 7/6. **2024:** 2-9, 0-9 LSC

Western New Mexico's offense averaged 41 points per game against regional teams in the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference. Yet, the offense only scored 13 points against its first four LSC opponents. While the offense improved later in the season, the Mustangs only scored more than 20 points against conference teams twice.

Billy Hickman identified the problem early last season, and the solution has been motivating the team during the offseason.

"We were not tough enough, strong enough, or deep enough to finish any of those football games. That's been our charge this year," Hickman said, "especially in the weight room. We've done a good job recruiting the Phoenix area, but we weren't doing a good job of developing them in the weight room."

Hickman said all other team activities are scheduled around their lifting times and hopes the focus on the weight room leads to an improved squad in 2025.

WESTERN OREGON

Coach: Arne Ferguson (20th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 4/10. **2024:** 6-5, 6-3

Losing seasons aren't common for WOU since Arne Ferguson became head coach over two decades ago. The Wolves' 6-5 record last year marked the 12th time in 19 seasons that WOU finished with a winning record. Still, depth was an issue for the Wolves last year. WOU opened LSC play with five consecutive victories before injuries to the offense led to three losses in their final four games.

Ferguson and his staff set out to build depth across the roster during the offseason, signing 29 players, including six offensive linemen and four wide receivers.

"We're excited about the size, length, and speed of this class. These guys are going to help us continue to compete at a high level in the Lone Star Conference, and many will contribute early," Ferguson said in a press release. "This class has the potential to be the best to come out of WOU."

5 PLAYERS TO KNOW

C SLADE EDWARDS, CENTRAL WASHINGTON

The All-American is the only returning offensive lineman. His leadership will be key for the Wildcats to win the LSC.

QB BRAEDEN FULLER, ANGELO STATE

The Floresville native burst onto the scene last year, leading the Rams to the LSC title and DII playoffs.

QB JACK TURNER, TEXAS A&M-KINGSVILLE

Few know Scott Parr's system like the Louisiana Tech transfer, whose play will determine the Javelinas' fate in 2025.

S XAVIER WALTON, ANGELO STATE

An All-LSC defensive back last year, the San Antonio Harlan product's leadership will be critical for a young Rams defensive backfield.

CB CAM MANAHAN, WEST TEXAS A&M

Josh Lynn expects big things from the Lubbock Coronado standout, who Lynn believes should've earned all-conference honors last year.

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Photo Credit: Christian Guerrero

Cam MANAHAN

The anchor of the West Texas A&M secondary, Mahanan — a Lubbock Coronado product — should be one of the LSC's best defenders.

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Division III

BY CORY HOGUE

IIII TEXAS TEAMS RELOAD
WITH BIG GOALS, NEW FACES

AUSTIN COLLEGE

Coach: Tony Joe White (3rd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 6/4. **2024:** 2-8, 2-6 SCAC

Tony Joe White is known for rebuilding college football programs. However, academic standards at Austin College limit their ability to recruit transfers, leaving White and his staff to build the program with high school players who will stay and develop for four years.

"We had a good offseason training and worked hard in the weight room. You can see more of a buy-in from our players now. We're trying to bring in an infusion of talent and let them grow and mature. Eventually, we're going to be playing some older guys," White said. "We embrace our academic standards. It's more challenging to flip a roster because the pool of guys available is smaller, so it takes longer to build the program. But we're getting there."

White said the team is making progress on being a player-led team, with players holding each other accountable for missing assignments or being late to practice.

EAST TEXAS BAPTIST

Coach: Calvin Ruzicka (3rd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 6/4. **2024:** 5-4, 2-4 ASC

For the sixth consecutive season, East Texas Baptist will have a new offensive coordinator after Ryan Smith was named head coach at Grapevine High School. However, head coach Calvin Ruzicka ensured the Tigers' offense would retain some continuity by promoting Jeb Spinney to offensive coordinator.

"We've kept the verbiage and terminology the same with our offense, and Spinney was a protégé under Smith and was involved in the game planning last year, even though he was the tight end coach," Ruzicka said. "We gave more responsibility to (offensive line coach) Donald Kinchen, who played for Smith at (Nelson), and he's helped add power to our run game."

ETBU will also have a new quarterback in 2025, after last year's ASC Player of the Year, Kaden Brown, entered the transfer portal. Ruzicka said Diego Narezo had a good spring and is the favorite to be the starting quarterback, having backed up Brown last season.

HARDIN-SIMMONS

Coach: Jesse Burleson (15th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 9/9. **2024:** 10-1, 6-0 ASC

It has been nearly a quarter century since

Hardin-Simmons won three consecutive ASC titles. Head coach Jesse Burleson was a member of those teams in the late 1990s and early 2000s, both as a player and an assistant coach, and understands what it takes to sustain success.

"Complacency is a killer, and we have done everything in our power not to become complacent," Burleson said. "First, we don't want to be satisfied with just winning the conference championship. The other part is understanding that nothing carries over from year to year, and every team is different."

The Cowboys are loaded for a three-peat for the first time since winning four straight from 1998 to 2001. Still, Burleson and the Cowboys know that winning a conference title is one step. The next step is winning the program's first playoff victory since reaching the Division III semifinals in 2000.

HOWARD PAYNE

Coach: Coby Gipson (1st season). **Starters returning O/D:** 2/5. **2024:** 1-8, 0-6 ASC

Coby Gipson isn't daunted by the monumental task ahead of Howard Payne in 2025. After all, every coaching stop during his collegiate career has involved rebuilding a program. He understands the win-loss record is one measure of a team's success.

"Every coach should be measured inside on maximizing the capacity of their team. If you maximize the capacity of your team, then you've laid a foundation that you can build from," Gipson said. "There will be teams that win eight games this year and underachieve, and other teams will win five games and have a great year. I don't know the number of wins we'll have this year, but we're working to maximize the capacity of our team."

Gipson expects HPU to "fight, scratch, and claw" for three quarters and give themselves a chance to win every game. He challenged his team to protect the football, create explosive plays, and limit pre-snap penalties.



Caden BOSANKO

The Texas Lutheran quarterback shared the SCAC Player of the Year award last season, and should be even better in 2025.

Photo Credit: Joshua Eaton

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Division III

MARY HARDIN-BAYLOR

Coach: Larry Harmon (3rd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 6/4. **2024:** 8-4, 4-2 ASC

The Crusaders brought back memories of their 2004 run to the national championship game, as they defeated Trinity, Hardin-Simmons, and Linfield before falling to Johns Hopkins in the DIII quarterfinals last year. Head coach Larry Harmon brought back another name from the past with the return of Stephen Lee as offensive coordinator.

"What's great about Steve is that he's like-minded," Harmon said. "He coaches the offense, but he's also coached defense, and it's nice when you're a defensive guy in a head coach role to have a guy on the other side with a similar philosophy of what championship football looks like."

Harmon's standards for 2025 haven't changed despite losing key players to the transfer portal in April.

"We have some young guys who have taken their lumps and had to learn things the hard way, but now have a great understanding of what it takes to be successful in our program."

McMURRY

Coach: Jordan Neal (7th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 9/6. **2024:** 7-3, 7-1 SCAC

The move to the Southern Collegiate Athletic Conference provided immediate dividends for McMurry, who claimed a share of the program's first conference title since 1983. McMurry seeks its first outright conference championship in 2025 before returning to the ASC in 2026.

"I'm excited about our offense, especially our offensive line. We lost our center and right guard to graduation, but our offensive line coach, Matt Newby, has done an amazing job with this group," head coach Jordan Neal said. "Defensively, our secondary has a slight edge over the line as our strongest position group, and (new defensive coordinator) Correy Washington has a similar scheme to what we ran last year."

The offense will have a proven leader with SCAC co-Offensive Player of the Year Jess Hoel returning to Abilene after entering the transfer portal in December. The Abernathy native has 5,596 total yards and 56 touchdowns in his first two seasons.

SOUTHWESTERN

Coach: Bill Kriesel (2nd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 6/10. **2024:** 4-6, 2-5 SAA

Bill Kriesel is a Southwestern University man through and through. Still, he was surprised by the timing of former head

coach Joe Austin's retirement for other career opportunities last July. Kriesel relied on his 13 years of experience with the Pirates after being named interim head coach. His interim tag was removed in November.

"I've never been one of those guys always looking for somewhere else to go every year. I'm happy here, and the players and staff responded well when (Austin) left," Kriesel said. "We kept guys in house who understand what it takes to play in our program. We kept the train on the tracks, made a few changes as we went along, and made the best out of a difficult situation."

The Pirates will rely on an experienced defensive unit in 2025 while the offense replaces some key players who entered the portal during the offseason.

TEXAS LUTHERAN

Coach: Neal LaHue (4th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 7/8. **2024:** 9-2, 7-1 SCAC

The 2024 season was historic for Texas Lutheran in head coach Neal LaHue's third season. The Bulldogs shared the program's first conference championship since 2014 and earned the school's second appearance in the DIII playoffs. TLU received an at-large bid and a first-round bye before falling to Linfield in the second round. Still, the Bulldogs field a relatively young roster ready to make noise in 2025.

"Our senior class is going to be big this year, but they've stuck together. We have a large sophomore class and a good mixture of guys,"

LaHue said. "I feel good about our receiver depth this year, and we have a couple of young freshman quarterbacks behind Caden Bosanko that had a solid spring."

Bosanko returns to lead TLU's offense after sharing conference Player of the Year honors last season. The Bulldogs also return both of their starting running backs, who earned all-conference honors in 2024.

TRINITY

Coach: Jerheme Urban (12th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 8/8. **2024:** 8-3, 6-1 SAA

It has been a decade since the Trinity Tigers football program finished with a record below .500. Their consistency coincides with the arrival of head coach Jerheme Urban, who immediately praises his players for the sustained success.

But Urban has a dilemma that he hasn't faced in a decade — the Tigers enter fall camp searching for a starting quarterback. Urban said all five quarterbacks are competing to lead the offense in 2025, including Welker Horn, brother of former Trinity standout quarterback Tucker and defensive back Raider. He arrives following a successful high school career at Lubbock Christian.

"We're seeing improvements, but we'll have our work cut out for us in fall camp," Urban said. "Welker had a great high school career, but he can't put unfair expectations on himself. He also needs to trust that we don't have any unfair expectations outside of being a phenomenal teammate and person like his brothers."



Photo Credit: Michael Hall

Jess HOEL

The dynamic McMurry dual-threat quarterback returns to Abilene after earning SCAC co-Offensive Player of the Year honors in 2024.

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Sooner Athletic CONFERENCE

BY CORY HOGUE

NAIA COACHES BUILD CULTURE,
CHASE TITLES IN 2025 SEASON

NELSON

Coach: Jared Hudgins (2nd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 4/8. **2024:** 3-7, 1-7 SAC

The 2024 season was about establishing a culture for head coach Jared Hudgins, who didn't have his full staff in place until late last summer. Hudgins said returning players have bought into the culture and are putting in the work.

The Lions added around 50–60 players during the summer, and Hudgins noted the importance of establishing the program's identity before so many new faces arrive.

"We're a unique place. This place doesn't change for you, and that can be difficult. We must establish who we are so when new players arrive, they see how we operate," Hudgins said. "We upped our standards on academics, and if a guy is struggling in class, he doesn't get to come to spring practice. I'm doing the kids a disservice if I let them practice with bad grades, and it doesn't help the team because they might not have the grades to play."

TEXAS COLLEGE

Coach: Jarraill Jackson (4th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 7/8. **2024:** 7-3, 5-3 SAC

The best story in college football last year was at Texas College, where the Steers produced a historic season. One of the least-funded programs in the country secured seven wins — the most since 1948.

"We have to keep moving forward. We lost some key guys, but we added transfers who made plays during the spring," head coach Jarraill Jackson said. "This team will be different than last year. We pushed the ball downfield more on offense last year. This season, we're going to put the ball in the hands of our young receivers and let them make plays."

Jackson noted the difference between the Steers and the top teams in the Sooner Athletic Conference was along the line of scrimmage. He said the Steers will be bigger on both sides of the line this season, which he hopes will result in a conference title.

TEXAS WESLEYAN

Coach: Brad Sherrod (2nd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 8/8. **2024:** 10-1, 8-0 SAC

Brad Sherrod's first season as head coach at Texas Wesleyan was one for the history books. A record-setting offense led the Rams to their third consecutive — and first outright — Sooner

Athletic Conference title, and one of the top eight seeds in the NAIA playoffs. Expectations are high in 2025 with eight starters returning on each side of the ball.

"I believe every team is different, so this team needs to forge its own identity," Sherrod said. "We lost a lot of men and a lot of production on offense, and we must find a way to replace that production and leadership. Defensively, we lost guys who produced a lot of fumbles, sacks, and tackles for loss. We have some players we're excited about, and we're focused on building depth on both sides of the ball during the spring."

WAYLAND BAPTIST

Coach: Marcos Hinojos Sr. (3rd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 8/10. **2024:** 4-6, 3-5 SAC

Wayland Baptist has steadily improved under the direction of Marcos Hinojos Sr. Last year, the Pioneers posted their most victories since 2019. Yet, the record still fell below expectations.

"We took a step forward last year, but not as big a step as we were expecting, and that's disappointing," Hinojos said. "But there are a lot of good things to take from last season, and our team realizes how close we are to being good. They believe that an eight-win season is closer to reality if they put in a little more work and time."

Hinojos will have his third different offensive coordinator in three years after Bryan Wood was named head coach at Iowa Park High School. Former Sul Ross offensive coordinator Christian Escobar replaces Wood, and the offense should improve with a young roster that gained valuable experience last year.

PREDICTION

1. TEXAS WESLEYAN
2. OUAZ
3. WAYLAND BAPTIST
4. LANGSTON
5. TEXAS COLLEGE
6. LOUISIANA CHRISTIAN
7. NELSON
8. OPSU
9. ARKANSAS BAPTIST



Carson RODGERS

The Texas Wesleyan quarterback dazzled in 2024, leading the Rams to their first outright SAC title and a top eight seed in the NAIA playoffs.

DC
TX

Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
NAIA



AMERICAN FOOTBALL COACHES ASSOCIATION

“

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John Snelson, Head Coach- Dickinson



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SWJCFC

BY CORY HOGUE

JUNIOR COLLEGE TEAMS RELOAD,
EYE PLAYOFFS AND TITLE RUNS

BLINN

Coach: Ryan Mahon (9th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 6/7. **2024:** 4-5, 2-5 SWJCFC

A loss at home to end the regular season kept the Buccaneers from making the SWJCFC playoffs for the first time since 2021. However, head coach Ryan Mahon believes his team has an excellent mix of veterans and youth entering the 2025 campaign, which he hopes leads Blinn back to the conference playoffs.

"We signed 56 kids, which is the most I've signed since I've been here, and that's a good thing," Mahon said. "We'll always look to sign a stud or anyone on the offensive or defensive line, but we're pretty dang full. We signed an outstanding freshman class, and we're very excited about it."

Blinn lost all five games last year by an average of 5.4 points, and were within one score in every defeat. The Buccaneers handed Navarro one of its two defeats last season and could challenge for the conference title with better execution late in games.

CISCO

Coach: Charlie Rizzio (2nd season). **Starters returning O/D:** 4/7. **2024:** 4-5, 4-4 SWJCFC

Charlie Rizzio's debut season as a head football coach was a rousing success, earning the Wranglers' first appearance in the conference playoffs since capturing the league's title during the 2021 pandemic season. Rizzio credits his assistant coaches and players for the success.

"I'm so dang lucky to have these assistant coaches. This isn't an inclusive program. We are an exclusive program because we know the type of coach and player that will be successful here," Rizzio said. "We'd rather be a coach or player short than get the wrong guy in here to screw up what we have going. There's nothing fancy about this place, and we're honest about who we are. (Cisco) is a tiny country town where you have nothing to do but academics, lift weights, and play football."

Rizzio's honest approach has resonated with his staff and players, which could produce another conference title for the program in 2025.

KILGORE

Coach: Willie Gooden (7th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 2/5. **2024:** 6-4, 4-4 SWJCFC

The last time Willie Gooden was this excited about his defense, the Rangers won the SWJCFC title and made the NJCAA semifinals. That was two short years ago. But this time is different. Gooden believes he has an offense that can match his defense, with hopes of earning a spot in the NJCAA national championship game at West Texas A&M.

"I think we'll have one of the roughest and toughest defensive lines in the conference.

PREDICTION

1. KILGORE
2. NAVARRO
3. TYLER
4. TRINITY VALLEY

5. CISCO
6. BLINN
7. NORTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA A&M
8. NEW MEXICO MILITARY INSTITUTE



Tyler JUNIOR COLLEGE

The Apaches were one of the junior college ranks' biggest surprises in 2024; can they capitalize on that momentum in 2025?

We're above average on the defensive line and at linebacker, but the defensive backfield is where it's going to get tough for folks," Gooden said. "The offensive line is our strength, and we have an above-average backfield and receiving corps."

The lone question for Kilgore is at quarterback, where Gooden said they brought in some transfers to add competition. Still, Gooden believes they have a quarterback on campus who can lead the team to victory.

NAVARRO

Coach: Ryan Taylor (4th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 5/6. **2024:** 9-2, 7-2 SWJCFC

Ryan Taylor arrived in Corsicana with high expectations after leading Cisco to its first undefeated season in school history. The Bulldogs fell just short of a conference title in 2023, losing in the championship game, but cleared that hurdle in 2024 with a remarkable run culminating in Navarro's first conference title since 2019.

However, repeating is never easy in junior college, and Taylor is seeking to reload after losing every starting wide receiver, tight end, and linebacker from last year's team.

"We're trying to find those guys this spring. We have some young guys who played a little for us last year and are going to have a bigger role this year," Taylor said. "We're probably going to have a couple of guys that are qualifiers who will get picked up by NCAA Division I schools. So, we need to pick up some pieces in the transfer portal to fill some voids."

TRINITY VALLEY

Coach: Sherard Poteete (8th season). **Starters returning O/D:** 4/7. **2024:** 5-4, 3-4 SWJCFC

Trinity Valley has been consistent since Sherard Poteete was promoted to head coach in 2018. The Cardinals seek their seventh consecutive

winning record under Poteete.

"Right or wrong, we're always a bunch of freshmen this time of year, so we're going to live in the weight room," Poteete said.

Two freshmen the Cardinals signed this year were from Malakoff, 15 minutes away from TVCC. Poteete watched a lot of the Tigers during the last four years with his son, Parker, on the squad. Now, he'll enjoy a closer view of Parker and Malakoff quarterback Mike Jones in 2025.

"Mike Jones is a gamer, a winner, and a gritty kid who has us excited. He had offers to play safety, but he wants to see if he can be a college quarterback," Poteete said. "Parker has a nose for the football, and I'll have the best seat in the house to watch them play."

TYLER

Coach: Tanner Jacobson (3rd season). **Starters returning O/D:** N/A. **2024:** 7-4, 7-2 SWJCFC

Tyler's football program took a significant step forward in Tanner Jacobson's second season leading the Apaches. Tyler made the conference playoffs for the first time since 2021, advanced to the SWJCFC championship game against Navarro, and posted the program's best overall winning percentage since 2015. Impressively, Tyler accomplished these feats after starting the season 0-2.

"We took a step forward as a program last year, and I was proud of that group," Jacobson said. "We have some key returners on both sides of the ball that we feel good about, and we added some pieces on the defensive side who we believe will be productive for us."

Jacobson's focus during the spring is to find a receiver willing to be the top target.

"I don't want to have receivers by committee," Jacobson said. "I want a guy to stand up, be the alpha, and demand the football when the game's on the line."

DC
TX

Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
SWJCFC

**RECRUITING**

Winnsboro receiver Camden Capehart hauls in a touchdown pass during the Red Raiders' regional semifinal matchup with Liberty-Eylau. Capehart ranks among the top receiver prospects in the Class of 2026.

Photo by Shiela Haynes

Texas TOP 300

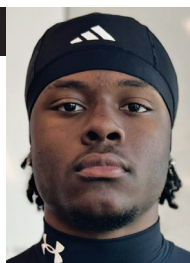
TOP 10 — ATHLETES

X'zavier Barnett 6-3 185 Yoakum

Legend BEY

ATH | 5-11, 185 | NORTH FORNEY

Bey is one of the state's most electric athletes, starring at quarterback with dual-threat ability. His future may be at wide receiver, where he will be a nightmare in space — hard to square up, harder to catch, and one cut away from a score.



Jermaine Bishop	5-11	160	Willis
Jack Duckworth	6-0	170	Rockwall
Davian Groce	6-2	190	Frisco Lone Star
Keisean Henderson	6-4	180	Legacy School of Sports Sciences
Jalen Lott	6-0	170	Frisco Panther Creek
Cardae Mack	5-9	170	Humble Atascocita
S'Vioarean Martin	6-1	185	Palestine
Paris Melvin Jr.	5-11	170	Cypress Springs

BEST OF THE REST — ATHLETES

Jaleal Allen	5-10	160	Crowley
Kaegan Ash	6-0	200	Mount Enterprise
William Blaylock II	6-3	205	Cypress Ranch
Aja Bradford	6-1	190	Houston Lutheran South
Lakeyleon Graves	6-0	180	Kilgore
Brayden Henry	5-9	165	Abilene
Edward Kelly Jr.	5-10	180	Klein
Darien Lewis	5-11	180	Amarillo Palo Duro
Mason Manning	5-10	170	Orangefield
Payhton Porter	6-4	200	Melissa
Ry Reed	5-10	170	Gordon
Stryker Reed	6-0	190	Gordon
Jamarion Richardson	5-10	150	Texarkana Pleasant Grove
Jerious Singletary	6-3	225	Huntsville
Jett Taylor	5-11	185	Grand Saline
DeCorian Thompson	5-9	165	Mount Pleasant
Tanner West	6-1	180	Katy Jordan
Kane White-Tinsley	5-11	175	Canyon West Plains

TOP 10 — DEFENSIVE BACKS

Jason Bradford	6-2	195	Temple
Chace Calicut	6-3	190	Galena Park North Shore
Jordan Deck	6-3	185	Frisco Lone Star
Braylon Edwards	6-0	185	Duncanville
Markel Ford	6-0	185	DeSoto
Marcell Gipson	5-11	175	South Oak Cliff

Yaheim RILEY

DB | 6-0, 180 | AUSTIN ANDERSON

Riley is a rare athlete on the back end — explosive, fast and rangy. His arrival at Anderson brings immediate help to the secondary and gives the offense a vertical threat to help fill the void left by TCU signee Ed Small's departure.



Jamarion Vincent 6-2 165
Donovan Webb 6-0 175
Isaiah Williams 6-0 185

Waco Connally
Frisco Panther Creek
Fort Bend Marshall

BEST OF THE REST — DEFENSIVE BACKS

Lebron Bauer	5-10	170	Allen
Luke Bell	6-0	170	New Braunfels Canyon
Thompson Bennett	6-2	190	Austin Westlake
Maliek Bracy	6-0	190	Argyle
Aaron Bradshaw	6-3	190	North Crowley
Bradley Brown	6-1	180	Plano
Chance Collins	5-11	165	Mansfield Timberview
Dylan Davis	6-0	170	Lewisville
Jordan Davis	6-2	195	Dallas HSSA
DaQuwan Dunn	6-1	172	Richardson Berkner
Rocky Dunn	6-0	190	Melissa
Jayden Flournoy	6-0	180	Burleson
Brandon Ford	5-11	180	Crowley
Jeremy Garner	5-11	150	Iowa Colony
Kayden Gilbert	6-0	165	Aldine Davis
Ryan Gilbert II	5-11	175	North Forney
Rickey Giles	5-11	185	South Oak Cliff
Xavier Harmon	6-2	185	Conroe
Xaier Hiler	6-4	180	Denton Ryan
Damian Horace	6-0	170	Conroe
Brock King	5-11	170	Port Arthur Memorial
Noah Lewis	5-11	175	Terrell
Victor Lincoln	6-0	165	Lancaster
Isaiah Mcmillian	6-1	170	Katy
Maddox Quiller	6-1	190	Pflugerville Hendrickson
Jermaine Santana-Diaz	6-1	180	Fort Bend Ridge Point
Jakalen Sheffield	5-10	170	Kilgore
Jordan Stevens	6-1	175	DeSoto
Carter Stewart	6-1	170	Alvin Shadow Creek
Zachary Taylor	6-1	180	Katy Jordan
Josiah Turner	5-10	175	North Forney
Jaden Vaughn	5-10	175	Cy-Fair
Josiah Vilmael	6-0	170	Fort Bend Travis
Kai Wheaton	5-11	175	Allen

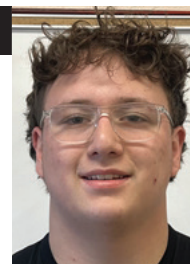
TOP 10 — DEFENSIVE LINE

Landon Barnes	6-3	220	Duncanville
Carter Buck	6-6	240	Lake Travis
Jamarion Carlton	6-5	240	Temple
Jesse Ford	6-4	235	Arlington Martin
KJ Ford	6-3	245	Duncanville
Julian Hugo	6-4	230	Cibola Steele
Jake Johnson	6-3	285	Prosper

Alister VALLEJO

DL | 6-3, 270 | LIBERTY HILL

With a 375-pound bench press and violent hands, this powerhouse surged up recruiting boards during the spring evaluation period. The 11-5A Division II Defensive Lineman of the Year combines raw strength with natural leverage to consistently dominate the point of attack.



Texas TOP 300

Jaimeon Winfield	6-3	290
Hudson Woods	6-3	230

BEST OF THE REST — DEFENSIVE LINE

Jimmy-Phrisco Alo-Suliafu	6-3	260
Cason Applewhite	6-3	230
Tucker Ashford	6-3	240
DJ Beasley	6-2	245
Adam Berns	6-5	250
Daryl Campbell	6-3	315
Cameron Christian	6-0	275
Jordyn Crites	6-6	255
Dycin Davis	6-3	205
Carson Dempsey	6-3	225
Ben Duncum	6-5	255
Xavier Fleming	6-0	280
Maddox Flynt	6-1	275
Tyler Hagler	6-1	320
Amontre Harris	6-4	220
Tiki Hola	6-3	270
Truth Holmes	6-3	290
Kordae Houston	6-2	270
Ayden Johnson	6-1	310
Krush Johnson	6-3	275
Christopher Knauls	6-4	250
Alijah Lash	6-3	225
Demarcus Marks	6-4	215
Shaun McDowell	6-2	280
Duncan McGhee	6-4	265
Zaqwaun Nunn	6-0	280
Devyn Phillip	6-3	200
Justin Roberts	6-2	265
Romair Smith	6-3	235
Robaire Smith Jr.	6-4	240
Jarvis Spires	6-1	285
Brysen Maxwell-Steele	6-1	290
Jaylen Stewart	6-2	230
Quincy Tchikou	6-3	235
Kore Thomas	6-1	275
Cullen Thompson	6-4	215
Obinna Umeh	6-3	225
Kaleb Walker	6-2	240
Uzziah Warmate	6-0	250
Erroll West	6-0	235

TOP 10 — LINEBACKERS

Jamarion Phillips	6-0	220
Daquives Beck	6-1	210
Kaedyon Cobbs	6-0	200

Kosi OKPALA

LB | 6-2, 215 | KATY MAYDE CREEK

Physically dominant with an elite frame, the four-star OLB is a rare blend of size, twitch and IQ. He bends the edge with purpose but can also shadow ball carriers in space. His instincts and quick-trigger reaction time pop on tape.



Richardson
Smithson Valley

Katy Jordan
Palestine
Fort Worth Christian
North Crowley
Fort Worth Christian
Katy Paetow
Kilgore
Friendswood
Abilene Cooper
Aledo
Lake Travis
Lewisville
Austin Westlake
Gilmer Buckeyes
Humble Summer Creek
Bastrop
Sulphur Springs
South Oak Cliff
Mount Pleasant
Amarillo Tascosa
Frisco Lone Star
Haslet Eaton
Spring Westfield
Richmond Foster
Texarkana Texas High
Galena Park North Shore
Fort Bend Hightower
Smithson Valley
Fort Bend Ridge Point
Fort Bend Ridge Point
Cypress Springs
Marlin
Pearland
Cypress Ranch
Dallas First Baptist
Conroe Grand Oaks
Houston St. Thomas
Lindale
Denton Ryan
Denton Ryan

South Oak Cliff
Carthage
Denton Guyer

Carson Crawford	6-2	205
Noriel Dominguez	6-2	200
Tieson Ejiawoko	6-2	220
Tank King	6-2	205
Calvin Thomas	6-3	210
Izayah Young	6-0	205

BEST OF THE REST — LINEBACKERS

Calvin Carter	6-3	225
Bryson Castile	6-2	200
Maximus Corbin	6-2	215
Joseph Credit	6-1	205
Jayden Cupitt	6-3	215
Michael Dent III	6-1	200
Ryder Garcia	6-2	225
CJ Mooring	6-2	210
Kailer Pettijohn	6-2	195
Reilarean Phillips	6-1	205
Preston Pitts	6-3	205
Jeremiah Smith	6-0	210
Kenneth Youngblood	6-1	200

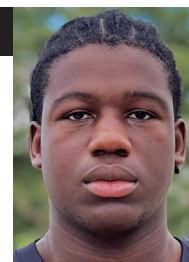
TOP 10 — OFFENSIVE LINE

Noah Best	6-4	290
Drew Evers	6-4	285
Bryce Gilmore	6-4	275
Zaden Krempin	6-5	270

Avery MORCHO

OL | 6-6, 270 | FORT BEND RIDGE POINT

Few match Morcho's upside. He passes the eye test with an elite wingspan and light feet, making him one of the nation's top offensive tackles. A true blindside protector, he's a priority target for college football's biggest and best programs.



Felix Ojo	6-6	285
Nicolas Robertson	6-3	330
John Turntine III	6-4	275
Aaron Wolford	6-4	285
Max Wright	6-8	310

BEST OF THE REST — OFFENSIVE LINE

Jordan Burnett	6-5	330
Damien Chisum	6-3	275
Carey Clayton	6-3	270
Keegan Collins	6-5	275
Chase Elrod	6-7	265
Rhett Gray	6-8	290
Nick Henry	6-7	295
Lucas Hickey	6-4	270
Nick Howard	6-5	285
Vincent Johnson	6-5	310
Pupunagatoa Katoa	6-4	370
Eddie Lartigue	6-3	285
Teagan Lindsey	6-5	270
Jerald Mays	6-3	275

Carthage
Richmond Randle
Georgetown East View
Port Arthur Memorial
Cypress Ranch
San Marcos

Sheldon C.E. King
Arlington Bowie
Melissa
Pearland Oilers
Mansfield Lake Ridge
Pflugerville Weiss
Denton Guyer
Austin Vandegrift
Anna
Alief Elsik
Clear Falls
Katy
Cedar Hill

Midlothian
Flower Mound
Prosper
Prosper

Mansfield Lake Ridge
Klein
North Crowley
Port Neches-Groves
Melissa

Fort Bend Ridge Point
Texarkana Texas High
Southlake Carroll
Canyon West Plains
Seminole
Weatherford
San Marcos
Prosper Walnut Grove
Pearland
Sulphur Springs
Euless Trinity
Klein Collins
Callisburg
Pflugerville Weiss

DC TX

DAVE CAMPBELL'S
TEXAS FOOTBALL

RECRUITING
TOP 300

Texas TOP 300

Jacob McRae	6-5	285
Michael Milson	6-4	270
Clay Mitchell	6-5	280
Day'jon Moore	6-3	305
Justin Morales	6-4	260
Marcus Page Jr.	6-6	275
Rowdy Pearce	6-4	285
Troy Pless	6-5	275
Foard Polley	6-4	285
Puleileite Primus	6-4	325
Jadyn Rhodes	6-4	290
Devan Robison	6-3	315
Khalil Sanogo	6-5	280
Kaden Scherer	6-6	275
Kole Seaton	6-5	270
Hugh Smith	6-4	275
Sean Stover	6-3	280
Cortavious Tisaby	6-6	300
Marques Uini	6-4	280
Payton Williams	6-3	290
Tr'e Williams	6-3	300

TOP 10 — QUARTERBACKS

Bowe Bentley	6-2	200
Jack Daulton	6-2	180
Jake Fette	6-0	190
Quinn Murphy	6-3	200
Nelson Peterson	6-2	185
Angelo Renda	6-0	180
Romin Seymour	6-4	175
Grant Smith	6-4	215

Miles TEODECKI

QB | 6-2, 205 | AUSTIN VANDEGRIFT

A state champion quarterback with sharp decision-making and elite poise, Teodecki is a left-handed passer who dices up defenses with quick reads and crisp accuracy. He thrives in high-pressure moments and plays with the maturity of a seasoned veteran.



Ziondre Williams	5-11	165
Rees Wise	6-2	215

BEST OF THE REST — QUARTERBACKS

Kyden Barker	6-1	195
Corey Dailey	6-5	175
Kase Evans	6-3	200
Jacob Janeczek	6-1	190
Kaeden Johnson	6-5	210
Zach Johnson	6-4	200
Kaleb Maryland	6-0	185
Jett Surratt	6-1	170
Cole Taylor	6-4	210

TOP 10 — RUNNING BACKS

Tradarian Ball	5-10	185
KJ Edwards	5-9	175

Allen
Port Arthur Memorial
Sinton
Willis
El Paso Franklin
North Forney
Midland Christian
Killeen Shoemaker
Houston Stratford
Midland
West Orange-Stark
Pasadena Memorial
Mansfield Legacy
Georgetown
North Forney
Fort Bend Ridge Point
Prosper
South Oak Cliff
Copperas Cove
Aledo
Huntsville

Celina
The Woodlands
El Paso Del Valle
Liberty Christian
Forney
Southlake Carroll
Fort Bend Ridge Point
Conroe Grand Oaks



Anna
Austin Westlake

Clear Springs
Seguin
Lexington
Lovejoy
Fort Bend Marshall
Klein Cain
Galena Park North Shore
Carthage
Pflugerville

Texarkana Texas High
Carthage

Ryan Estrada	5-10	185
Jonathan Hatton Jr.	6-0	205
Izayah Lee	5-11	190

Ryelan MORRIS

RB | 5-9, 170 | HONEY GROVE

Explosive and electric at the 2A level, Morris overwhelms defenses with his burst. He stars on both sides of the ball, but his future is on offense — where his open-field vision and hybrid skill set make him a dangerous all-purpose weapon



Javian Osborne	5-10	190
Christian Rhodes	6-1	200
Ashton Rowden	5-11	195
Jett Walker	6-2	215

BEST OF THE REST — RUNNING BACKS

Keilan Chavies	5-10	180
Caleb Crenshaw	5-9	180
Javion Garrett	6-1	215
Juntavious Harris	5-9	175
John Hebert	5-10	185
Trae Hill	5-9	200
Cody Jordan	5-10	185
Josiah Lucas	5-8	170
Amante Martin	5-11	190
Levon Morton	5-7	160
Cam Newton	5-9	185
Davis Penn	5-10	180
Jorden Prince	6-0	180
Dionne Sims	5-10	170
Nicholas Tramble	5-9	160

TOP 5 — TIGHT ENDS

Braden Bach	6-5	225
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Ben BAYS

TE | 6-5, 210 | BOERNE

Bays carries a strong family legacy at Boerne, following his brother Braden's path to stardom. A versatile two-way standout, he projects to play offense at the next level, where his size and catch radius make him a reliable red-zone weapon.



Jaivion Martin	6-3	250
Ryder Mix	6-4	225
Zachery Turner	6-3	215

BEST OF THE REST — TIGHT ENDS

Parker Almanza	6-3	215
William Mayes	6-6	230
Mason Mixon	6-4	220
Benny Okwura	6-4	210
Parker Ord	6-4	210
Jackson Stoner	6-3	230
Wyatt Villarreal	6-5	220

Pflugerville
Frisco Lone Star
Duncanville

Trophy Club Byron Nelson
Katy Tompkins
Richmond Randle
Katy Jordan
Frisco Panther Creek
Rockwall
Celina

Texas TOP 300

TOP 10 — WIDE RECEIVERS

Brock Boyd	6-1	170
Jordan Clay	6-3	195

Southlake Carroll
San Antonio Madison

Xavier Green	5-11	155
Prince Hall	6-3	190
Henry Harris	6-3	185
Robert Haynes IV	6-0	160
Keymian Henderson Jr.	6-4	180
Imari Jehiel	6-0	170
Davis Kinney	6-0	185
Davis McCray	6-2	190
Blake McLane	6-3	190
Keidric Osunde-Brown	5-8	160
Elijah Otieno	5-9	170
Davion Peters	6-0	165
Jaylen Pile	6-0	175
Amarean Porter	6-0	160
Dequane Prevo	5-10	160
Khamill Pruitt	6-2	170
Khayden Reed	6-1	185
Cooper Reid	6-4	185
Keavon Roberts	6-4	175
Cedric Ross	5-8	165
James Scott	6-4	200
Ty Sexton	5-10	180
Daveon Singleton	5-9	150
Caleb Smith	5-8	160
Derek Stevenson	6-1	170
Chris Stewart	6-0	175
Ayson Theus	5-9	160
Jabarie Thornton	5-11	175
Cade Wallace	5-11	175
Xavier Warren	6-0	160
Aiden Whitmore	6-4	185
Mason Williams	6-3	175

The Colony
Killeen Ellison
San Marcos
Fort Bend Ridge Point
Carthage
Forney
Fort Bend Travis
San Antonio Cornerstone
Frisco Emerson
Arlington Bowie
North Forney
Lake Belton
Dallas Parish Episcopal
Wylie East
Texarkana Liberty-Eylau
Arlington Lamar
Little Cypress-Mauriceville
Dripping Springs
Port Arthur Memorial
Lubbock Estacado
Conroe Oak Ridge
Katy Jordan
El Paso Chapin
Allen
Katy Paetow
Alvin Shadow Creek
Duncanville
Waco La Vega
South Grand Prairie
Georgetown
North Crowley
Daingerfield

Chase CAMPBELL

WR | 6-0, 180 | WOLFFORTH FRENSHIP

The four-star is a human highlight reel with back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons to his name. His foot speed and burst are lethal — able to break ankles underneath or blow past defenders vertically. No wonder 20-plus programs have extended scholarship offers.



Ethan Feaster	6-2	180
Kaydon Finley	6-1	190
Aljour Miles II	6-3	200
Brayden Robinson	5-9	155
Zion Robinson	6-4	180
London Smith	6-0	175
Jayden Warren	6-2	185

DeSoto
Aledo
Kaufman
Red Oak
Mansfield
Waco University
Iowa Colony

BEST OF THE REST — WIDE RECEIVERS

Malachi Augustus	6-0	185
Tatum Bell Jr.	5-10	175
Daniel Berry	5-9	165
David Brewer	6-0	175
Brandon Brown	5-8	150
Kohen Brown	6-0	180
Mike Brown	6-0	175
Camden Capehart	5-9	155
Dameon Crowe	5-6	140
Jarell Gary Jr	5-11	195
Corbin Glasco	5-9	180

Aldine Nimitz
Frisco Heritage
Pflugerville Weiss
Fort Bend Travis
Killeen Shoemaker
Waxahachie
Legacy School of Sports Sciences
Winnsboro
Richardson
Round Rock McNeil
Denton Guyer



Cedric ROSS

The Lubbock Estacado star enjoyed a breakout junior season, establishing himself as one of the top receivers in Texas in the Class of 2026.

Photo Credit: Paul Roberts

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David Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

RECRUITING
TOP 300

FIVE-YEAR RECRUITING REVIEW BY DAVID BARRON

1 TEXAS

COACHES: Tom Herman (2020), Steve Sarkisian (2021-).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 30 (25 high school, five transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: RB Bijan Robinson, QB Ja'Quinden Jackson (transferred to Utah and Arkansas), OL Alfred Collins (two-year starter).

TOP PERFORMERS: Robinson (2022 Doak Walker Award), DB Jahdae Barron (2024 Jim Thorpe Award), LB Jaylen Ford (two-time all-conference).

NFL DRAFT: Barron (Broncos, 2025 first round), Robinson (Falcons, 2023 first round), Albert Collins (49ers, second round), Vernon Broughton (Saints, 2025 third round), Ford (Saints, 2024 fifth round), Kitan Crawford (Cardinals, 2025 seventh round, after transfer to Nevada).

PARTICIPATION: 21 lettermen, eight starters, 14 transfers out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 45-20 (2023 and 2024 College Football Playoff semifinalists).

TOP 25 FINISHES: 2020 (20th), 2023 (3rd), 2024 (4th).

SUMMARY: Herman was gone after a year, and Sarkisian inherited a 2020 class with considerable star power, albeit limited depth, that contributed to Texas' slow build toward contention. Robinson and Barron won major awards, and four-year starter Jake Majors was a finalist for the 2024 Campbell Award for scholastic achievement. Eight of 14 transfers started at their new schools.

2 TCU

COACHES: Gary Patterson (2020-21), Jerry Kill (2021, interim), Sonny Dykes (2022-).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 36 (27 high school, nine transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: RB Zach Evans (one-year starter, transferred to Ole Miss), WR Quentin Johnson, OL Garrett Hayes (three-year letterman).

TOP PERFORMERS: Johnson (two-time all-conference), RB Kendre Miller (2022 all-

conference), DB Bud Clark (three-year starter, returns for 2025).

NFL DRAFT: Johnson (Chargers, 2023 first round), Brandon Coleman (Commanders, 2023 third round), Miller (Saints, 2023 third round), Dylan Horton (Texans, 2023 fourth round), Tyler Guyton (Cowboys, 2024 first round after transfer to Oklahoma), Evans (Rams, 2023 sixth round after transfer to Ole Miss), Savion Williams (Packers, 2025 third round).

PARTICIPATION: 25 lettermen, nine starters, 14 transferred out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 38-24 (2022 CFP finalist).

TOP 25 FINISHES: 2022 (2nd).

SUMMARY: Like Sarkisian at Texas, Sonny Dykes benefited from the efforts of his predecessor. Five players were three-year starters, and seven were NFL Draft selections, two of them after transferring. Seven of 14 transfers started at their new schools.

3 TEXAS TECH

COACHES: Matt Wells (2020-21), Sonny Cumbie (2021 interim), Joey McGuire (2021 Texas Bowl, 2022-).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 44 (22 high school, 22 transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: WR Ja'Lynn Polk (one-year letterman, transferred to Washington), WR Loic Fouonji (four-year letterman, transferred to

Vanderbilt), RB Tahj Brooks.

TOP PERFORMERS: LB Tyree Wilson (2022 All-American), Brooks (two-time all-conference), OL Caleb Rogers (55 career starts).

NFL DRAFT: Rogers (Raiders, 2025 third round), Brooks (Bengals, 2025 sixth round), DB Kobee Minor (Patriots, 2025 seventh round, after transfers to Indiana and Memphis).

PARTICIPATION: 27 lettermen, 12 starters, 16 transfers out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 34-28 (3-1 bowls).

SUMMARY: Wells' reliance on transfers didn't help him keep his job, and his departure no doubt helped trigger the stampede to the transfer portal. Two who stayed, linebackers Wilson and Colin Schooler, paid big dividends for McGuire.

4 TEXAS A&M

COACHES: Jimbo Fisher (2020-23), Elijah Johnson (2023 interim), Mike Elko (2024-).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 38 (35 high school, three transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: RB DeVon Achane, DB Jaylon Jones (three-year starter), WR Demond Demas (two-year letterman, transferred to Garden City CC).

TOP PERFORMERS: LB Edgerrin Cooper (2023 consensus All-America), DB Antonio Johnson Jr. (two-time

all-conference), Achane (2022 all-conference).

NFL DRAFT: Achane (Dolphins, 2023 third round), Johnson (Jaguars, 2023 fifth round), Jones (Colts, 2023 seventh round), Cooper (Packers, 2024 second round), McKinnley Jackson (Bengals, 2024 third round).

PARTICIPATION: 19 lettermen, seven starters, 18 transferred out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 35-23 (won 2020 Orange Bowl).

TOP 25 FINISHES: 2020 (4th), 2021 (25th).

SUMMARY: This group was touted as the foundation of Fisher's era, and, indeed, it included five draft choices. Fisher was gone after three-plus years and so were many of his recruits. QB Haynes King was the most prominent among the 18 transfers, seven of whom started at their new schools. Receiver Moose Muhammad was the only Fisher signee who played in 2024.

5 BAYLOR

COACHES: Dave Aranda (2020-).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 26 (19 high school, seven transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: DE James Sylvester (transferred to Stephen F. Austin), TE Drake Dabney (two-year starter, transferred to TCU), RB Taye McWilliams (two-year letterman).

TOP PERFORMERS: TE Drake Dabney (set school

record for receiving yards by a tight end in 2023, transferred to TCU), DB Lorando Johnson (three-year starter, transferred to Arkansas), DB Al Walcott (second-team all-conference in 2022).

NFL DRAFT: DL William Bradley-King (Commanders, 2021 seventh round).

PARTICIPATION: 20 lettermen, 11 starters, 12 transfers out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 31-30 (2021 Big 12 and Sugar Bowl champion).

TOP 25 FINISHES: 2021 (8th).

SUMMARY: Four veterans stayed around for the Bears' second winning season and bowl victory in an up-and-down five-year span that included three sub-.500 finishes. A high transfer rate also blunted its final grade.

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TEXAS FOOTBALL

COLLEGE
RECRUITING REVIEW

RECRUITING REVIEW

6 HOUSTON

COACHES: Dana Holgorsen (2020-23), Willie Fritz (2024-).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 36 (24 high school, 12 transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: DT Chizodie Nwankwo, OL Derek Bowman (one-year letterman, transferred to USF), QB Sofian Massoud (transferred to Hampton and University of Mary).

TOP PERFORMERS: WR Tank Dell (2022 second-team All-America), DB Art Green (2021 second-team all-conference), Nwankwo (four-year starter, transferred to Colorado).

NFL DRAFT: Dell (Texans, 2023 third round).

PARTICIPATION: 15 lettermen, 12 starters, 13 transfers out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 31-28 (played in 2021 American

Athletic title game).

TOP 25 FINISHES: 2021 (17th).

SUMMARY: Holgorsen was a mad scientist of roster construction, and while some of his choices hit, a few blew up on the lab bench. This group produced starters but little depth. The old man of the class was Tank Jenkins, who signed with Texas A&M in 2018 and played in 2024 in his seventh year of eligibility. And, yes, he has his degree.

7 SMU

COACHES: Sonny Dykes (2020-21), Rhett Lashlee (2022-).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 39 (32 high school, seven transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: WR Danny Gray, WR Thad Johnson (did not letter), DE DeVere Levelston (two-year starter).

TOP PERFORMERS: Gray (2021 all-conference), OL

Branson Hickman (three-year starter, transferred to Oklahoma), OL Marcus Bryant (2023 all-conference, transferred to Missouri).

NFL DRAFT: Gray (49ers, 2022 third round), Bryant (Patriots, 2025 seventh round, after transfer to Missouri).

PARTICIPATION: 23 lettermen, seven starters, five transfers out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 44-19 (2023 American Athletic champion, 2024 CFP quarterfinalist).

TOP 25 FINISHES: 2023 (22nd), 2024 (12th).

SUMMARY: In keeping with SMU's reliance on transfers at the time, JC transfers Gray and Levelston were among the standouts in this group that contributed to one of the best five-year records for the 2020 recruit class.

8 UTSA

COACHES: Jeff Traylor (2020-).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 35 (29 high school, six transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: TE Allen Horace (one-year letterman, transferred to Navarro College), WR Isaiah Davis (two-year letterman, transferred to

Stephen F. Austin), OL Walker Baty (one-year letterman).

TOP PERFORMERS: LB Jamal Ligon (five-year starter), DB Donyai Taylor (2023 second-team all-conference).

PARTICIPATION: 21 lettermen, six starters, six transfers out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 46-20 (2021 and 2022 Conference USA champions).

SUMMARY: With a few exceptions, this group mostly provided depth and backup support on UTSA's back-to-back league title teams. It had the lowest transfer rate among Texas schools, which helped its score.

9 RICE

COACHES: Mike Bloomgren (2020-04), Pete Alamar (2024 interim).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 37 (28 high school, nine transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: DB Gabe Taylor, DB Sean Fresch (two-year starter), DB Plae Wyatt (one-

year starter, returns in 2025).

TOP PERFORMERS: Taylor (five-year starter), QB TJ McMahon (5-5 as 2022 starter before season-ending injury, transferred to Marshall), OL Jovaun Woolford (two-time all-conference mention).

PARTICIPATION: 33 lettermen, nine starters, nine

transfers out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 20-34.

SUMMARY: The COVID-wrecked 2-3 2020 season included a scrubbed showcase game against LSU at NRG Stadium and a home game against UTEP that was canceled. A 7-6 finish in 2021 was the lone highlight.

10 TEXAS STATE

COACHES: Jake Spavital (2020-22), G.K. Kinne (2023-).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 34 (16 high school, 18 transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: LB Maureese Wren (did not letter, transferred to Oklahoma), WR Drue

Jackson (three-year letterman), DB Zion Childress.

TOP PERFORMERS: OL Russell Baker (three-time all-conference mention), DB Tory Spears (two-year starter), Childress (two-year starter, transferred to Kentucky).

PARTICIPATION: 27 lettermen, nine starters, 10

transfers out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 26-26 (2-0 bowl games).

SUMMARY: Spavital loaded up on transfers in 2020 to limited success, but a few stuck around to enjoy back-to-back eight-win seasons and bowl wins under Kinne.

11 UTEP

COACHES: Dana Dimel (2020-23), Scotty Walden (2024-).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 48 (29 high school, 19 transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: RB Willie Eldridge (did not letter), LB Osaiaisi Taueli (two-year letterman),

OL Michael Flood (did not letter transferred to Northern Arizona).

TOP PERFORMERS: LB Tyrice Knight (2023 all-conference), DT Keenan Stewart (three-time all-conference mention).

NFL DRAFT: Knight (Seahawks, 2024 fourth round).

PARTICIPATION: 24 lettermen, nine starters, seven transfers out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 21-36 (0-1 bowl record).

SUMMARY: A 7-6 record in 2021 with a trip to the New Mexico Bowl was the Miners' highlight under coach Dimel, who died in December at age 62.

12 NORTH TEXAS

COACHES: Seth Littrel (2020-22), Eric Morris (2023-).

2020 ROSTER NEWCOMERS: 33 (24 high school, nine transfers).

PROJECTED STANDOUTS: OT Erik Williams (did not letter), DE Davontae McCrae (one-year letterman), WR Detraevon Brown.

TOP PERFORMERS: Brown (2023 all-conference), LB Jordan Brown (2023 all-conference), OL Jett Duncan (three-year starter).

NFL DRAFT: Upton Stout (49ers, 2025 third round, after transfer to WKU).

PARTICIPATION: 16 lettermen, six starters, 10 transfers out.

FIVE-YEAR RECORD: 28-34 (0-4 bowl record).

SUMMARY: Littrell and Morris got limited production out of this group, which managed four bowl trips and topped out at 7-7 with a visit to the C-USA championship game in 2022.

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TEXAS FOOTBALL
Dave Campbell's

COLLEGE
RECRUITING REVIEW

Recruiting by the **NUMBERS**

TEXAS IS BACK: LONE STAR STATE'S SURGE RECLAIMS RECRUITING DOMINANCE

Over the past couple of years, the state of Texas' grip on producing recruits slipped slightly. But if there were any fears that Texas would relinquish its place at the top, the Class of 2025 should put those to rest. Texas once again led the nation in high school signees, surging to a whopping 368 high school players signing FBS letters of intent; that's 36 more signees compared to 2024. In turn, the Lone Star State led all states in total signees as well, with 391. Florida once again finished second, signing 294 players all from high school; and Georgia held firm in third place with 257 signees, also all from the prep ranks. In total, recruiting volume saw another nice bounce in the Class of 2025 — 2,747 players signed to FBS teams in this class, roughly a 5% bump from last year. That increase was especially prevalent in the high school ranks, with 2,513 high school seniors signing, up from 2,364 the year before. Aside from Texas' 36-player increase from 2024 to 2025, California (+26), Oklahoma (+17), Virginia (+15) and Utah (+15) saw substantial increases in their high school signing crop. On the other side of the coin, Pennsylvania (-13) saw the steepest decline in high school signees, followed by Arizona (-8), North Carolina (-7) and Mississippi (-7). In sum, the 131 FBS teams (not including the service academies, whose recruits do not sign letters of intent) signed players from 46 states and the District of Columbia, as well as consistent overseas talent producers England, Germany, Canada, Australia and American Samoa. The international surprise is Nigeria, as Vanderbilt signed three-star edge rusher Georgia Okorie out of the A.D.R.A.O International School. Punter Hayden Craig became Maine's first player since 2019 to sign with an FBS team when he inked with Florida. Alaska, Montana, Rhode Island and Vermont were the only states to not sign a player; Vermont's FBS signee drought is now two decades long.

GEORGIA CONTINUES ITS PER-CAPITA REIGN AS TEXAS SLIPS

It's not all good news for the Lone Star State; Texas slipped to eighth in the nation in high school signees per capita, with 1.18 high school FBS signees per 100,000 population. The pound-for-pound leader in producing talent remains Georgia, at 2.3 signees per 100,000 — though that is a small drop for the Peach State in the metric compared to 2024. Alabama held on to its No. 2 spot in the ranking, followed by Mississippi. Hawaii and Utah round out the top five, signing 1.73 and 1.34 players, respectively.

STATE	TOTAL SIGNED	JUCO	HS	2024 HS SIGNED	POPULATION	HS SIGNED/ 100K
Texas	391	23	368	36	31,290,831	1.18
Florida	294		294	9	23,372,215	1.26
Georgia	257		257	-3	11,180,878	2.30
California	249	62	187	26	39,431,263	0.47
Mississippi	128	76	52	-7	2,943,045	1.77
Ohio	122		122	13	11,883,304	1.03
Alabama	101		101	-4	5,157,699	1.96
Illinois	68		68	7	12,710,158	0.54
Kansas	67	46	21	6	2,970,606	0.71
North Carolina	64		64	-7	11,046,024	0.58
Maryland	62	1	61	4	6,263,220	0.97
Virginia	60		60	15	8,811,195	0.68
Louisiana	59		59	3	4,597,740	1.28
Tennessee	57		57	-5	7,227,750	0.79
Michigan	55		55	4	10,140,459	0.54
New Jersey	53		53	5	9,500,851	0.56
Utah	52	5	47	15	3,503,613	1.34
Indiana	52		52	1	6,924,275	0.75
Pennsylvania	50	3	47	-13	13,078,751	0.36
Oklahoma	41		41	17	4,095,393	1.00
South Carolina	40		40	0	5,478,831	0.73
Arizona	39		39	-8	7,582,384	0.51
Missouri	36	1	35	6	6,245,466	0.56
Nevada	30		30	11	3,267,467	0.92
Iowa	29	11	18	-1	3,241,488	0.56
Hawaii	25		25	7	1,446,146	1.73
Kentucky	23		23	2	4,588,372	0.50
Washington	23		23	4	7,958,180	0.29
Connecticut	22		22	7	3,675,069	0.60
Wisconsin	21		21	0	5,960,975	0.35
New York	21		21	6	19,867,248	0.11
Nebraska	19		19	4	2,005,465	0.95
Arkansas	18		18	-2	3,088,354	0.58
Minnesota	16		16	-2	5,793,151	0.28
Oregon	14		14	-1	4,272,371	0.33
Massachusetts	14		14	1	7,136,171	0.20
Colorado	13		13	-5	5,957,493	0.22
District of Columbia	10	4	6	0	702,250	0.85
Australia	9		9	5	—	—
New Mexico	9		9	6	2,130,256	0.42
West Virginia	5		5	-3	1,769,979	0.28
Idaho	5		5	-1	2,001,619	0.25
Canada	4	2	2	-2	—	—
England	3		3	-3	—	—
Wyoming	3		3	0	587,618	0.51
South Dakota	3		3	2	924,669	0.32
Delaware	3		3	-1	1,051,917	0.29
American Samoa	2		2	—	—	—
North Dakota	2		2	1	796,568	0.25
Germany	1		1	-4	—	—
Nigeria	1		1	1	—	—
Maine	1		1	1	1,405,012	0.07
New Hampshire	1		1	0	1,409,032	0.07

GRAND TOTAL **2,747** **227** **2,520**

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TEXAS FOOTBALL

RECRUITING
BY THE NUMBERS

Recruiting by the **NUMBERS**

TEXAS TALENT SPREADS WIDER THAN EVER, REACHING NEARLY EVERY REGION

The vast expanse of Texas certainly has its talent hotspots, but there has never been a wider spread of prospects in the Lone Star State. Of the 21 regions of the state as designated by DCTF, a staggering 19 of them produced at least one FBS signee in the Class of 2025. Familiar locations like Dallas-Fort Worth (153 signees) and Houston (118 signees) led the way, but in nearly every corner of the state, there's talent. Aside from DFW and H-Town, Austin (27 signees, up from 24) and San Antonio (13 signees, up from 10) saw the largest increases. But it's the newcomers that are the headline here — after producing no signees in 2024, the Concho Valley, Hill Country, Rio Grande Valley and Panhandle combined to put out five prospects in 2025. Only Wichita Falls and Laredo were shut out of the prospect party.

REGION	SIGNEES
Austin	27
Big Country	3
Brazos Valley	5
Coastal Bend	1
Concho Valley	1
DFW	153
East Texas	19
El Paso	1
Golden Triangle	6
Hill Country	2

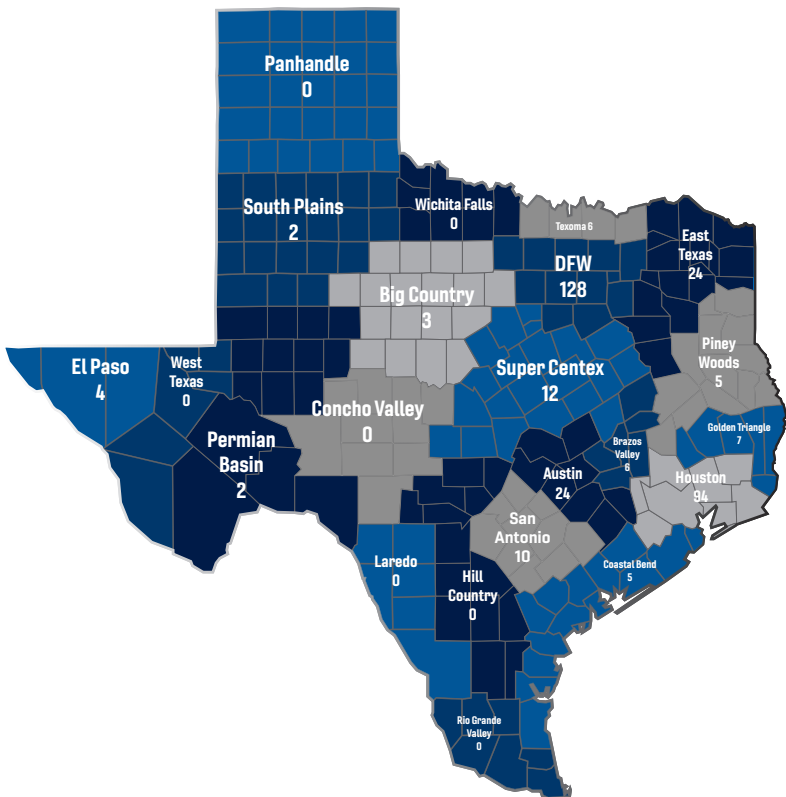
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Malcolm SIMPSON
The Hitchcock defensive star signed with Nebraska, one of three players from the 3A powerhouse to sign with FBS teams.

Photo Credit: Andy Tolbert

REGION	SIGNEES
Houston	118
Panhandle	1
Permian Basin	1
Piney Woods	3
Rio Grande Valley	1
San Antonio	13
South Plains	4
Super Centex	6
Texoma	3



TEXAS' OFFENSIVE TILT

TEXAS' OFFENSIVE FOOTPRINT WIDENS

One of the most consistent trends in recruiting has been Texas' prolific production of offensive talent, and the Class of 2025 bore that out in even more stark relief — 198 of the 368 FBS signees from the Lone Star State play on the offensive side, a whopping 53.8%. That's a noticeable jump from last year's 48.8 percent tilt to the offense. Defense made up 41.8 percent of the signees, while athletes and specialists made up the remaining 4.3 percent. It was an especially boffo year for the pass-catchers — 88 receivers and tight ends signed to the next level, compared to just 63 in the Class of 2024.

	TEXAS SIGNEES	% OF SIGNEES
POS .		
WR	70	19.0%
CB	36	9.8%
DL	34	9.2%
RB	33	9.0%
S	33	9.0%
OT	32	8.7%
LB	29	7.9%
IOL	25	6.8%
Edge	22	6.0%
QB	20	5.4%
TE	18	4.9%
ATH	14	3.8%
K	1	0.3%
LS	1	0.3%

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Shelton FULLER
The El Paso Del Valle defensive back signed with Utah, becoming the lone FBS signee from El Paso in the 2025 cycle.

Photo Credit: Reno Del Toro

DCTX

TEXAS FOOTBALL

RECRUITING
BY THE NUMBERS

Recruiting by the **NUMBERS**

STATE CHAMPIONSHIP CONTENDERS LEAD THE CHARGE IN WIDE RANGE OF HIGH SCHOOLS

A total of 204 different Texas high school football programs signed at least one player to an FBS letter of intent in the Class of 2025, led by North Crowley and Galena Park North Shore, each of whom signed a whopping eight players to the next level. Class 6A powers Duncanville, Alvin Shadow Creek and Coppell were close behind with seven signees, while perennial prospect factory DeSoto signed six FBS players. And at the risk of sounding obvious, teams with a bevy of FBS signees tend to be pretty good at football — the nine schools that signed at least five players to the FBS ranks went a combined 109-12 in the 2024 season. As far as pound-for-pound production, nobody did it like District 12-3A Division I, specifically Columbus and Hitchcock. Fresh off its first state championship, Columbus (enrollment: 537.5) signed four players to the FBS — quarterback Adam Schobel (TCU), edge-rusher John Schobel (TCU), running back Grayson Rigdon (Arizona State) and edge-rusher Anthony Shorter (Sam Houston) — for a remarkable rate of one signee

SCHOOL	SIGNEES	ENROLL.	STUDENTS/ SIGNEE
Columbus	4	537.5	134.4
Hitchcock	3	526	175.3
Reagan County	1	215.5	215.5
Timpson	1	225	225.0
Bellville	3	741	247.0
Blue Ridge	1	296	296.0
Jasper	2	673	336.5
Jacksboro	1	348	348.0
DeSoto	6	2,127	354.5
Gunter	1	363	363.0

SIGNEES	SCHOOL
8	Galena Park North Shore, North Crowley
7	Alvin Shadow Creek, Coppell, Duncanville
6	DeSoto
5	Cibolo Steele, Fort Worth All Saints, Sachse

per 134 students of enrollment. District rival Hitchcock (enrollment: 526) was not far behind, with three signees — quarterback Lloyd Jones III (Texas Tech), defensive lineman Malcolm Simpson (Nebraska) and receiver Kelshaun Johnson (Texas A&M) — and a rate of one signee per 175 students.

NOBODY SHOPS LOCAL LIKE TEXAS STATE...

Maybe G.J. Kinne's just a big Texas high school football fan. Maybe he doesn't want to pay for flights. Whatever the case may be, Texas State is the only team in FBS to sign its entire high school class from within its home state — 18 high school signees for the Bobcats, all 18 of them from the state of Texas. Florida International came the closest to the feat, signing 19 of its 21 prep players from the Sunshine State, and Sam Houston nabbed third with nine of its 10 signees locally. Among Texas teams: UTEP, North Texas, TCU, Rice, Baylor and Houston all rank in the top 10 percent of shopping local, and every FBS team signed at least 45 percent of their class from the Lone Star State.

SCHOOL	TOTAL HS SIGNEES	IN-STATE	OUT-OF-STATE	IN-STATE PERCENTAGE
Texas State	18	18	0	100.0%
FIU	21	19	2	90.5%
Sam Houston	10	9	1	90.0%
Florida Atlantic	17	15	2	88.2%
UTEP	31	26	5	83.9%
Colorado	14	1	13	7.1%
Western Kentucky	14	1	13	7.1%
Arkansas State	24	2	22	8.3%
Boise State	24	2	22	8.3%
Wyoming	24	2	22	8.3%

...BUT MANY OTHERS IMPORT THEIR PLAYERS

The "shop local" mantra cannot be said for a variety of other programs across the nation. Four teams — Charlotte, Colorado State, Memphis and UConn — did not sign a single high school player from their home state. It's especially baffling for Charlotte and Memphis, which hail from relatively talent-rich states, as 121 combined high schoolers from North Carolina and Tennessee signed in the Class of 2025. The entire state of Colorado did most of its talent acquisition from afar: between Deion Sanders' Colorado and Jay Norvell's Colorado State, just one player from the The Centennial State signed with an in-state FBS team — Loveland tight end Zayne DeSouza, who signed with the Buffaloes.

POSITION-BY-POSITION

RECRUITERS COME TO TEXAS FOR ALL THEIR OFFENSIVE NEEDS

A glance at the position breakdown tells a clear tale about why colleges come to Texas: we got playmakers. The Lone Star State led all states in production at almost every offensive position — wide receivers (73), offensive tackles (35), running backs (34), interior offensive linemen (26), tight ends (19) and the more nebulous athletes (14). The exception is at quarterback, where California edged out Texas with 23 signees. Texas also showed out well on defense, leading the nation in safeties (37), defensive linemen (36) and linebackers (31), while Florida maintained its grip on the cornerback (42) and edge rusher (30) positions. But when it comes to position dominance, nobody does it like the Australians — seven of the 15 FBS signees at punter came from Down Under, by far the highest percentage of any state (or country) at any position.

POS.	TOTAL SIGNEES	% OF TOTAL
ATH	101	3.7%
CB	260	9.5%
DL	289	10.5%
Edge	225	8.2%
IOL	233	8.5%
K	22	0.8%
LB	248	9.0%
LS	9	0.3%
OT	246	9.0%
P	15	0.5%
QB	150	5.5%
RB	183	6.7%
S	235	8.6%
TE	172	6.3%
WR	359	13.1%

POS.	LEADING STATE	% OF SIGNEES	TOTAL
ATH	Texas	14	13.9%
CB	Florida	42	16.2%
DL	Texas	36	12.5%
Edge	Florida	30	13.3%
IOL	Texas	26	11.2%
K	Tennessee	3	13.6%
LB	Texas	31	12.5%
LS	Nevada	2	22.2%
OT	Texas	35	14.2%
P	Australia	7	46.7%
QB	California	25	16.7%
RB	Texas	34	18.6%
S	Texas	37	15.7%
TE	Texas	19	11.0%
WR	Texas	73	20.3%

DC
TX

Dave Campbell's
TEXAS FOOTBALL

RECRUITING
BY THE NUMBERS